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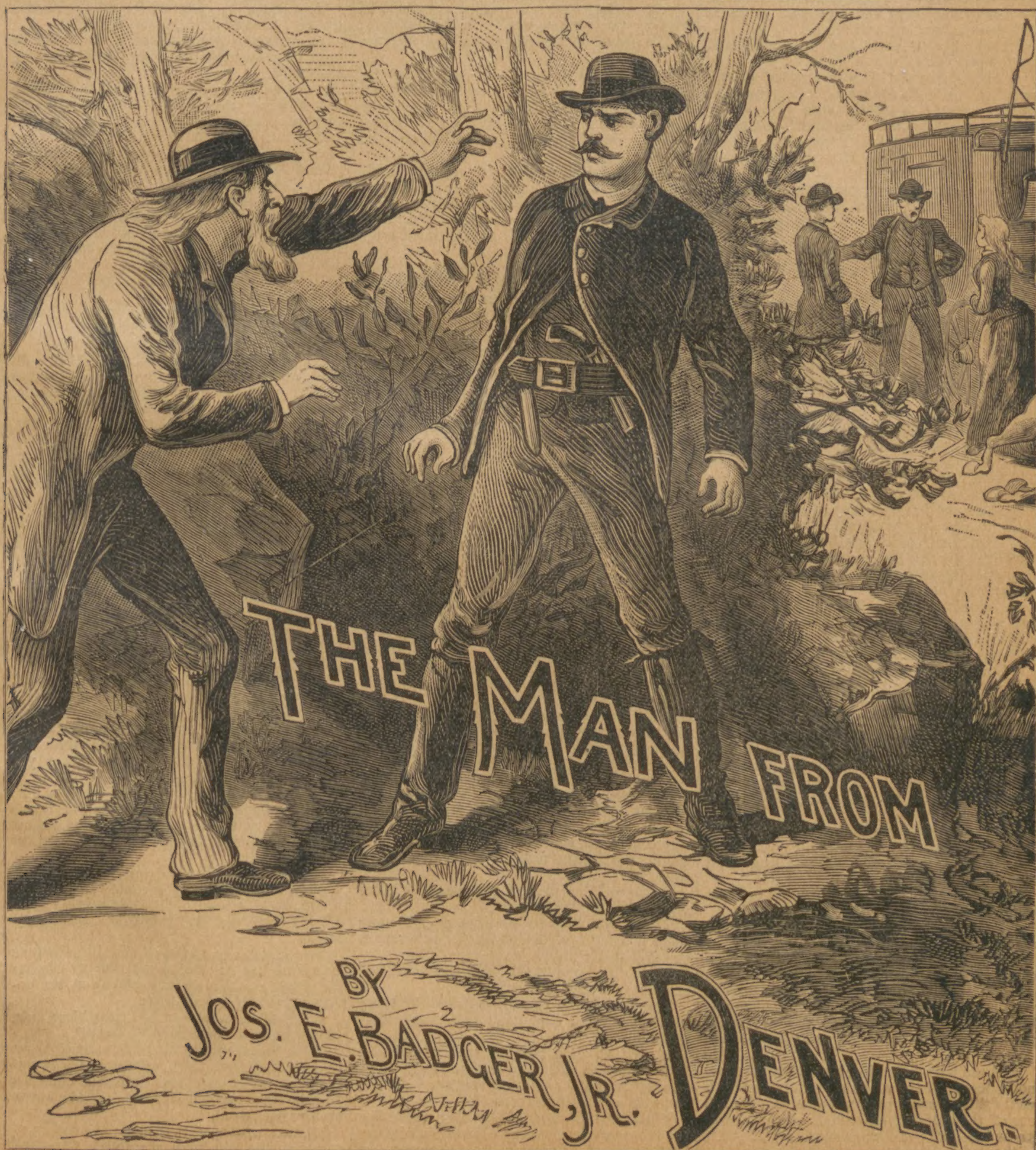
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THE Man From Denver;

OR,

The King-pin Sport's Diamond Deal.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.

CHAPTER I.

A PLUG OF TOBACCO.

"STEADY, man! You'll dump us in a— Look out!"

Reddy Wilson, the driver, gave a short laugh as the hub of his nigh front wheel grazed the frost-eaten point of rock, sending out a little puff of white powder as a further warning of their narrow escape from disaster.

His long lash shot forth in a snaky wave, to split the air close to the ears of his off-leader, and the stage for Deadwood rattled on at a still more merry pace now that a long stretch of fair road lay before them.

Heber Kane, the "outside," caught his breath sharply, and his hand fell away from the arm he had clutched involuntarily, as the driver gave an impatient shake to supplement that careless laugh.

"Great Scott, man! A little more and we'd have been—"

"Which is what I was a tellin' of ye, pardner. A leetle more sand when the tight pinch comes! A leetle more grit fer to brace yer back-bone! A sound hearse, a double-span like them 'ar beauties, a man on the box to han'le the ribbons, then— whar is you, agents?"

The veteran driver was feeling in a particularly boastful mood, just then, thanks to the extra amount of "wet groceries" which he had "surrounded" at the last station, but he was hardly prepared for so speedy an answer to his scornful query.

Crack! Crack!

From each side of the trail came a spiteful explosion, and as a bullet tore its way through Wilson's plentiful crop of brick-red hair, another missile took effect upon his off-wheeler, dropping the poor creature in its tracks, throwing all into confusion, yet most effectually halting the stage with its living freight.

"Hands up, all!" rung forth a clear-cut voice from the bushes which had served to mask the ambushade until now, "The first kick'll be your last, so, hands up!"

Thanks to the falling wheeler, the stage halted as suddenly as though it had run straight against the face of a rock-cliff, and as the armed road-raiders broke cover, with harsh threats and fierce cries, they found all in wild confusion, with none ready to dispute their coming.

Heber Kane gave a low cry at that sudden assault, and flung an arm around the half-drunken driver, snatching at the reins with his other hand as he shouted:

"Don't shoot! There's a lady inside, and—don't shoot, I say!"

With a seeming ease which spoke well for his muscles, Heber Kane swung the struggling driver around in front, thus giving himself a fair show at the brake. Kicking the beam over, he flung his whole weight upon the crutch, thus locking the hind wheels as though both had been chained.

From the interior came oddly-mingled sounds: shouts and oaths and cries, with the notes of a feminine voice rising high above all others.

Then once again did Heber Kane make himself heard:

"Don't shoot! We knuckle, gents! There's a lady who—"

"Steady, all!" came the added warning, as the masked road-ruffians broke cover to the more completely surround their prey. "Play white and live;—kick, and you're gone gossings! Keep your eyes peeled, men, and if the fools will have it, rub it in for keeps!"

If those who so suddenly broke cover were not veterans of the road they surely had been well drilled for the present occasion, for each one of the half-dozen masked men seemed to know his duty, and was eager to perform it without delay.

The grim muzzle of a loaded Winchester was thrust in at each window, while another couple of knaves drew knives and fell to work cutting and slashing at the harness, quickly disabling the whole outfit.

The masked agent, who had so far acted as spokesman, stood a little aloof, revolver gripped by each set of gloved fingers, now covering the box-seat, then shifting toward the stage proper, but all the time fully prepared for a death-shower in case of necessity.

Fortunately for all concerned, no doubt, the surprise had been so complete, so admirably planned, and so swiftly carried out, that not even the ghost of a chance for fight or flight was granted the passengers or the team.

"Open the door and single 'em out, men," came the next command from the road-raider chief. "And you, fellows, tumble off that box in a holy hurry, unless you'd rather come at my say-so—like this!"

Both revolvers were turned that way, and the hammers began to raise under the steady pressure of those gloved fingers.

"Don't shoot!" again exclaimed Heber Kane, shrinking visibly from those death-tubes as he began his descent from the box-seat. "We're not kicking, only—"

"More legs and less tongue, or you'll be kicking the bucket, old fellow!" grimly cut in the agent. "Tumble down and line up, will ye?"

There had never been a chance for a fight, and now even the boldest among those unlucky pilgrims could see that their sole chance lay in meekly submitting to the inevitable, obeying orders rather than fare far worse.

Covered by rifle and revolver the inside passengers emerged from the coach, one after another—four ordinary-looking men, such as every stage to or from the gold-mines is apt to contain, then two of very different quality.

One was unmistakably a lady, just now showing signs of that rough "shaking up," pale and trembling, yet exhibiting a degree of courage which would not have shamed either one of her stronger companions.

As her little feet touched the ground, the lady half-turned to assist the last passenger, at the same time uttering the words:

"Have pity, gentlemen, please! Uncle is old and— Careful, dear!"

A tall, gaunt, stoop-shouldered man of past three-score, whose long hair and full beard showed hardly more white than his face itself, was only saved from falling by her ready arm; and, seemingly forgetful of self in pity for another more weak, the young woman added:

"Have courage, Uncle Cephas! There is nothing to fear, for surely these gentlemen will not— Pity him, sirs! He is not strong, you see!"

"The bigger fool he for coming to a country where it takes a man to hold his own!" grimly retorted the road-agent chief; then adding in harsher tones: "Fall in, then! Line 'em up, men! It's business, now!"

"Drap in or drap out, critters!" gayly cried a brisk-moving fellow who seemed to feel himself called upon. "Line up, the pile o' ye! An' ef ary one wants to croak in a holy hurry, jest drap a flipper afore leave comes to ye—see?"

"Hands up, all of you, please!" sternly supplemented the chief.

Swift glances shot to and from the four passengers who had been first to emerge from the stage, and something of their thoughts might have been read in their faces, just then.

Boldly as these masked fellows acted, there was something lacking.

There was a waste of time and energy; there was far too much talk for veterans at the business, surely?

Were they amateurs? Was this an initial attempt at stage-robbery?

These were the questions asked by those keen eyes, but only shrugging shoulders made answer.

It was too late now for trying to better their situation, and if these were really "new hands," then their opening venture bade fair to prove a dazzling success!

While this bit of silent by-play was going on, the passengers were being ranged in line by the side of the road, each one commanded

to hold both hands above his head until bidden otherwise.

At the head of the line stood Heber Kane; tall, athletic, more than comely in his blond healthfulness, hardly marred by his rough-and-ready garb of corduroy and woolen, with slouch hat and heavy knee-boots.

He was paler than usual, and betrayed a degree of nervousness hardly to be looked for in a man of his seeming caliber, as the road-agent drew closer to him with suggestive action to match his speech:

"It's you fu'st, critter, an' fer the good o' yer hide, I'm hopin' ye'll pan out rich, too! Hold the bag wide open, pardner! Hyar's fer the pay-dirt, now!"

With swift and ruthless hands the robber "went through" this, his initial victim, laughing gleefully as Heber Kane groaned aloud.

"Cuts ye deep, eh, pardner?" the knave asked as he dropped the full wallet into the sack held open by his confederate.

"It's your turn now; mine'll come later, don't you forget it! I'll have a drop of your heart's blood for each dollar in that wallet, too!"

"Button up, old man!" sternly ordered the chief, stepping forward and sharply tapping the angry passenger with a pistol-muzzle. "Too much lip, you understand? Button up, or I'll do it with a blue pill!"

Kane scowled the defiance it would not be wise to utter, and the outlaw leader added, scoffingly:

"Search him all the closer, lads! Maybe he's howling over a little loss in hopes of escaping a greater one!"

But, only a watch and a few loose coins were added to the sack before the searchers passed Heber by as of no further profit.

As luck would have it, the old man whom the young lady had called Uncle Cephas stood second in line, his gaunt figure shivering with fear, for his person or his property, seemingly hardly able to hold his bony hands aloft as commanded.

Noting this, the searcher chuckled aloud, adding facetiously:

"Hyar's our huckleberry, pardner! Lousy with rocks, an' so p'izen eager fer to chip in his wealth that—stiddy, now, Gran'dad!"

"I haven't—I'm poor—too poor for robbing, gentlemen!" huskily quavered Cephas Copeland, flinching from those rude hands, yet not daring to offer actual resistance.

"They will not punish us for poverty, dear," soothingly spoke the young lady at his side. "You are welcome to that little, gentlemen, only harm him not! He is old and feeble, hardly—"

"Better save the rest until your own turn comes, don't you reckon, Beauty?" bluntly cut in the road-agent chief, with a gesture of impatience. "Stick to business, boy! There's too mighty much chin-music not to be wealth close at hand! Go to the skin if you don't strike it sooner!"

Those eager hands were already at work, slipping into and out of pockets with ready if not practiced skill, but so far only a few trifles had been brought to light.

A lean purse was found, but when opened by the robber it revealed no more than a few paltry dollars, and an oath accompanied it into the open mouth of the plunder-sack.

"You want to pan out more toll than the likes o' that, Gran'dad, or we'll hang yer hide on the fence for— Hello!"

Those nimble fingers closed upon a flat, hard package lying across the old man's heart, and snatching it forth, he gave a short laugh of blended amusement and disgust at the recognition.

"Waal, I will ber-durned! Plug ter-backer, an' black navy at that! Ef I didn't reckon we'd hit— Ugh! Fer mighty little I'd chaw ye up like I do this! An' now— Hello!"

The agent was twisting off a big chew as he spoke, but recoiled in surprise as Cephas Copeland made a sudden clutch at the tobacco, huskily ejaculating:

"Don't! I never— It's worthless, sir, only I want— Give it back, I say!"

With an execration the robber struck down those hands, but then, with a fierce cry of reckless rage, Copeland dashed a bony fist full into that masked face, sending the knave reeling backward.

Making a desperate snatch at the plug of tobacco, the old man stumbled, then fell

fairly into the grip of the road-agent, both men tumbling in an awkward heap to the roadway.

"Steady, all!" shouted the chief outlaw; but, if his voice was heard by either of those pair, it certainly was not heeded.

Cursing hotly, the robber whirled the old man over upon his back, nimbly rising to kneel himself, then fastening a vicious grip upon Mr Copeland's throat as he flashed forth a gleaming blade.

"Try to play boss with me, will ye? Think to ride a buckin' broncho like ye would—Stiddy, durn ye! Hyar's fer yer daylight, an'—"

The glittering weapon rose for the stroke, but before it could fall there came the sharp explosion of rifle or of pistol, and the would-be murderer fell heavily forward upon his prey!

CHAPTER II.

THE MAN FROM DENVER.

BLENDING with that explosion came the clear shout of a manly voice and the swift clatter of shod hoofs upon the stony trail!

"Set 'em up on the other alley, boy! That's a ten-strike, and I want a couple more o' the same sort to fill the frame! Back out, or order your coffins, dogs!"

Sharp and distinct rung forth the words, and he who uttered them came charging down that gentle slope as though he had an army at his back, shooting as he came, but with lead flying high lest more harm than good be done the honest portion of that confused assembly.

It all took place so suddenly, so unexpectedly, that hardly a hand could be lifted to aid either robber or robbed, until all was over so far as that part was concerned.

The young woman shrunk away with a low cry of affright.

The masked chief jerked up a revolver, but seemed at a loss how to use the weapon to the best advantage.

Cephas Copeland squirmed away from beneath that quivering burden, just as the hot life-blood began to gush forth, branding his bony right hand as it helped lift his trembling body from the dust.

As he gained his feet, Heber Kane caught hold of an arm with an inarticulate exclamation, but the old man jerked free with a harsh cry, then pounced upon that plug of tobacco, on behalf of which he had already risked death!

All this took place so rapidly as to seem simultaneous, in fact, and few present could have given the movements in detail.

Here again the road-agents acted more like new hands than veterans trained in the perilous art, for without even the semblance of a fight, the masked knaves broke away in mad flight, darting into the cover from whence their ambushade had been sprung, then racing at top speed for the horses which had been cached at a little distance for the time being.

Delaying only long enough to take a brace of snap-shots at the bold fellow who was charging the crowd, the masked chief himself sought safety in flight, without a second look toward his bleeding follower who lay quivering there in the white dust.

A whistling bullet scattered a little shower of twigs and leaves after his vanishing shape; but, instead of pressing the suit at once, he whose opportune arrival had cut the robbery short, wrenched up his good steed when near the stage, muzzle menacing Heber Kane as he called out in stern tones:

"Steady, pardner! What're you crowding the old gent for, pray?"

The big passenger shrunk back, an empty hand flying up as a flag of truce, while he stammered:

"I didn't know but what—if he was hurt by that—that dog!"

With a half-stifled cry the young lady sprung past Kane to where Copeland had recoiled, but her touch seemed to frighten the old man, as well as to arouse his strange rage again.

He gave a hoarse cry of anger as he struck off her hands, lifting a bony fist as its mate hurried that precious plug of tobacco behind his person.

"Look out, there!" sharply cried the latest comer, leaping from his saddle and striding

forward, with uplifted hand. "Don't strike a woman, man alive!"

It was the woman who made answer, turning her pale face his way with a faint smile as she slipped an arm around that gaunt figure, much as a mother might lend protection to a helpless child.

"He would not harm me, sir," she said, in tones that were still unsteady, as well they might be. "He only meant—those ruffians frightened him so terribly, that— It is all past, now, Uncle Cephas! This gentleman—We owe our safety to you, sir!"

"Don't mention it, I beg of you, ma'am," as his hat came off to match a graceful bow. "It just happened to be in my way, and so— Well, what's biting you, pray?"

Kane was touching an arm, and the big fellow forced a smile as the stranger wheeled sharply his way, frowning the while.

"Beg pardon, sir, but—may I ask where's the rest of you?"

"The rest of what, pray?"

"Of you—of your party, that is? Surely you never jumped in by your lonesomeness?" persisted Kane, flashing an uneasy glance around as he spoke.

"Is that the way you look at it, Mr.— I don't believe I rightly caught your name, sir?"

"My name's Kane: Heber Kane. And yours, sir?"

"Oh, I've got a full set, of course, but they're in my grip, yonder," with a nod toward his horse, which was nipping the younger leaves from a little clump of bushes across the trail. "I'm from Denver last, though, if that'll serve your purpose. So call me the Man from Denver."

Kane flushed hotly, either at words or at the keen gaze which accompanied them; but, letting that point pass without further pressing, he added:

"I was in hopes you had a party with you, sir, so we might hunt down those devils before— They cleaned me out, and I might as well lose life with the rest, unless I can get it back!"

He turned away with a passionate gesture, but paused as the Man from Denver spoke again:

"And you want me to back you up in chasing the rascals, is it?"

Heber shook his head slowly, his voice sounding dogged as he made reply:

"Not if you're alone, sir. One man's as good as two, and I'll just have a try if— Bah! where's the use in talking?"

He strode off into the bushes, along the trail left by the retreating road-agents, and the Man from Denver turned to other matters.

Reddy Wilson and the other men from the inside were gathered about the fallen outlaw and as the Man from Denver came forward, they fell apart far enough for him to see that the black mask had been removed, and that the luckless fellow was nearing his last gasp.

"Who is he? Anybody recognize him?" gravely asked the stranger, after that first keen glance assured him this was their first meeting.

Before any reply could be made, an interruption came from the direction taken by Heber Kane.

There was the sound of hoof-strokes, a floundering of a heavy body among the bushes, then the big passenger came into view, mounted upon a buckskin gelding.

"His nag, I reckon!" cried Kane, with a nod and look toward the dying robber. "Found it where t'others were hitched. I'm going to play even or go clean broke! If anybody asks, just say that I've gone after my money!"

Without pausing for answer or other comment, Heber Kane wrenched the buckskin around and sent him dashing recklessly away in the direction taken by the road-agents in their headlong flight.

Brief though this interruption was, it lasted long enough to work a grave change in that doomed robber; and as the Man from Denver again looked downward, he saw that all hope of learning aught through those lips was at an end.

A gasp or two, a brief quivering of those limbs, then silence came.

"He's gone!" muttered the Man from Denver, rising from a brief examination of the body, then adding as he flashed a look to-

ward the young woman, now standing alone not far from the stage: "Lend a hand, please, and we'll get him out of sight until the outfit's ready for the road."

The body was lifted and borne to cover, being placed under a spreading bush for the time being.

This move was scarcely completed before all were startled by a hoarse, fierce cry from another patch of shrubbery hard by, and, snatching a revolver from his belt, the Man from Denver sprung to the quarter, finding Cephas Copeland raging and raving, now wildly gesticulating, now tearing at his tangled locks of snow, acting more like one insane than like a person in his sober senses.

The young woman was among the first to reach the spot, and her trembling yet soothing tones served to recall the old man to himself.

The Man from Denver more than half expected to find Copeland engaged in a life-or-death struggle with some skulking remnant of the lawless gang; but, now that his fears on that point were set at rest, he drew aside, quietly but interestedly watching and listening to uncle and niece.

"There's nothing you can do or say to help, Alda, child," the old man huskily declared, almost roughly putting away those caressing arms. "Go! Don't—don't bother, girl! And you, fools!" showing his still strong teeth in a grimace of rage as he turned toward the curious passengers, at the same time shaking a clinched fist in their faces. "Go, I say! Leave me, will ye, fools?"

"Uncle! Dear Uncle Cephas!" murmured Alda Copeland, soothingly.

"Let them clear out, then!" persisted the old man, shaking from head to foot with poorly suppressed rage or mental anguish. "Go, ye hounds! Ye wouldn't help me fight off the robbers, and I'll not bear your gloating over— Go to the stage, Alda, girl, I say!"

Giving the girl a hasty push in that direction, Copeland turned toward the Man from Denver, whose opportune arrival on the scene had almost certainly saved his life, grasping an arm with nervous force as he mutteringly spoke:

"Come with me, sir! You're white; you're honest; and I want— Come with me, I beg of you, sir!"

"All right, uncle! With your kind permission, gentlemen?" spoke the stranger, smiling blandly as he gave a meaning nod toward the coach. "I will join you with my apologies in a minute or two, of course."

The passengers took their dismissal in good humor, lounging back toward the stage, where Reddy Wilson was pouring forth a torrent of imprecations as he viewed the ruthless havoc wrought by the knives of the road-agents.

Alda still lingered, but another command from the lips of her uncle sent her away, and then the old man turned toward the Man from Denver, letting fall the mask he had partially assumed.

"Look!" he hoarsely cried, plucking from his pocket a torn and tattered plug of tobacco, shaking it before the stranger's face in an access of fury. "Gone! Stolen! Robbed—I'm robbed, I tell you, man!"

"I don't just catch on, sir," said the Man from Denver, with a puzzled air as he glanced from plug to face, then back again. "Robbed of what, pray?"

"Robbed of a fortune! Robbed of a full half-million!" huskily panted the old man, brushing the great drops of cold sweat from his unusually pale face as he added:

"Those devils: they stole my diamonds!" The Man from Denver, gave a little start of interest, but before he could speak, Copeland added:

"Robbed! Tricked! Cheated out of my blessed diamonds! Half a million worth, I tell you, man!"

"And they got 'em; the road-agents, you mean?"

Cephas made another wild gesture, holding up that torn and ragged plug of tobacco, then hurling it far from him in his savage despair, to add:

"I thought so, first, but now I know better! That was why I leaped at the throat of yonder grinning devil—why I risked my life to tear from his clutches the plug of tobacco

where— A lie! All a lie! Even then I was cheated—I was most scurvily tricked; don't you understand, man alive?"

The Man from Denver slowly shook his head.

"I'm not so sure I do, uncle. How, tricked?"

"Oh, are you a fool like all the rest?" cried Copeland, with a gesture of despair.

"I thought my precious darlings were there, hidden in the tobacco, I tell you!"

"And—weren't they, though?"

"No—a thousand times over, no!" raged the old man. "I was tricked by some one else! My diamonds were stolen and another plug of tobacco substituted, don't you see? I was robbed even before those black masked hounds jumped out upon us!"

"But, uncle, I don't see just how that could have come about," the Man from Denver gravely spoke, in his turn. "Half-a-million worth, eh?"

"As Heaven hears me, I'm telling you the truth, sir!" earnestly asserted the old man, reading the true meaning of that half-smile. "I had gems to that value concealed in a plug of tobacco, as the safest place of hiding on a perilous route like this. And now—help me, sir! Help me get back my lost fortune, else I'll throw away my miserable life along with all the rest!" and he lifted his hands pleadingly.

For a brief space the Man from Denver stood perplexed, hardly knowing what step to take first. But, Copeland spoke again:

"I had all safe when I entered the stage, this morning, sir, so the trick must have been played by some of yonder—arrest them! Search them one and all, dear sir, and I'll be your slave for life! My stones! My diamonds! My life, I say!" he added, wildly rushing toward the stage.

CHAPTER III.

TRYING TO SOLVE THE MYSTERY.

ALTHOUGH he was far from feeling certain that the old man's brain had not been turned by fright, or that this claimed robbery was aught more substantial than the figment of shattered wits, the Man from Denver sprang swiftly after Cephas Copeland, checking his frantic progress with a hand whose power would not be denied.

"Steady, uncle!" came from his lips in hasty warning as he saw curious eyes turning their way, attracted by the inarticulate cries of the distracted passenger. "I'll help, if you don't hinder too much!"

With almost pitiless readiness the old man yielded to word and touch, his pale face lighting up to a degree which gave his present companion an uneasy tinge of conscience.

With a gesture meant to reassure those looking that way, and Alda Copeland especially, the Man from Denver slipped a hand through the arm of the old man, turning his unsteady steps aside for the moment, quietly speaking:

"You're in earnest, of course, sir? This isn't a mere fancy of yours, then? You have really lost—"

"My life—more than my very life!" agitatedly interrupted Cephas Copeland. "Surely you saw— Would I have fought with yonder devil for a mere plug of tobacco?"

"Well, it hardly seems so; yet you say it wasn't the right plug of tobacco after all?"

The old man groaned hollowly, wringing his bony hands, shivering as though on the verge of physical collapse.

"They robbed me! They stole away my treasure before—make 'em give it back, sir! Make 'em give me my own, if you be the white man you seem! You will? Oh, sir, say that you will force 'em to do me full justice, sir!"

By this time the Man from Denver was pretty well convinced that there was something more than mere raving in all this, though as yet hardly ready to believe the loss so enormous as Cephas Copeland claimed.

His handsome face turned graver as he glanced keenly toward the stage, around which the passengers were gathered, some helping to patch up the mutilated harness, and all betraying more or less excitement consequent upon their adventure.

If the guilty one was there, how could he be exposed the most surely? If Cephas Copeland had really been robbed, how was the mystery of that exchange to be solved?

After a brief silence, during which his brain was busy with such thoughts, the Man from Denver spoke again:

"You are positive you couldn't have mislaid the plug of tobacco yourself, sir?"

"Is it at all likely, sir? With so much of value hidden in it?"

"Well, one would hardly think so, for an honest fact," came the frank admission. "And how many knew of your treasure, sir?"

"No one at all! Would I be such an idiot as to tell the world?"

"No one, eh? Not even your—the young lady, yonder?"

"Alda, my niece? Her least of all! Why should I—to add more to her burden! No, no! I kept my secret until— But the devil who robbed me—who took my diamond plug and replaced it with that cursed trash for which I almost gave my life! Oh, help me, dear, kind sir! Help me recover my own, and I'll pay you what—you can name your own price—that is, of course, anything within the bounds of reason!"

The Man from Denver turned sharply away, thoroughly disgusted with that sudden change of tone and demeanor.

Up to now his pity had been strong for the aged sufferer, but at this abrupt glimpse of the cringing, fawning miser his gorge would rise.

Copeland almost timidly reached forth a trembling hand to touch an arm, huskily speaking:

"You will not— You will try, sir?"

"If nothing less will content you, yes," came the reply. "Yet it seems fairly impossible that any person could have robbed you without at least awakening your suspicions."

"I was tired. I believe I fell into a doze, by the way, sir. I had worried over—I had lost so much sleep that is," came the hardly intelligible explanation. "Whoever stole my—the tobacco, could hardly have disposed of it so soon! And—you will search 'em all, sir?"

"Unless you spoil all show by talking too much, yes," a little reluctantly assented the Man from Denver, turning once more in the direction of the stage-coach. Keep a lock on your jaw while I do the talking, will you?"

"Yes, yes! Anything at all, just so I get my— Must you mention them, then, sir?" with faltering tones as he clutched a skirt hastily.

"The diamonds, you mean?"

"Yes. If they all knew—if everybody learned how much they were worth, my life wouldn't— Just say some property of value, eh?"

Giving a nod as though agreeing to that request, the Man from Denver led the way back to the disabled stage, making a gesture which served to catch and hold the notice of all present.

"Merely a word or two, gentlemen, and to set the example of perfect frankness, permit me to introduce myself: Thomas Gayworthy, last from the Queen City of the Plains, sometimes called the King-Pin Sport, but better known, perhaps, as Ten-strike Tom."

"I knowed it from the jump-off!" quickly declared one of the passengers, with a frankly extended hand as he added: "Put 'er thar, pardner, an' do me proud!"

Gayworthy laughingly submitted to a general hand-shake, but then spoke more to the point:

"Now that we're on level footing, gentlemen, business goes! This gentleman has suffered a certain loss which he hopes may be remedied, and has asked me to act as his mediator. So—what was it you lost, uncle?"

Cephas Copeland was taken aback by this blunt query, but managed to stammer out:

"I was tricked—a plug of tobacco!"

The Man from Denver laughed amusedly at this, in which he was joined by the male passengers; but, he added, with real or affected gravity:

"Our good friend declares he lost his plug of tobacco before the road-agents chipped in, gentlemen, and so—line up, please!"

Sharply came the final words, and for an instant the passengers looked as though they

took this for another "hold-up;" but, as the Man from Denver smiled blandly into their astonished faces, they seemed to catch the point of the joke, and grinning broadly they obeyed.

With smiling jests Tom Gayworthy performed the odd task he had undertaken on behalf of a stranger, but neglecting naught which could possibly make that search a success.

One after another the four inside passengers were searched, not one being passed by until it was clear even to Cephas Copeland that his diamond-studded plug of tobacco could by no possibility lie hidden upon their persons.

While this curious performance was going on, Alda Copeland stood quietly by, her more than fair face betraying deep uneasiness, more for the man than for his real or fancied loss, as it seemed. But, as the vain quest came to an end, and Cephas Copeland bowed his white head with a hollow groan of despair, the maiden drew close to his side, gently soothing him with voice and with tender hands.

Reddy Wilson had left his cut and slashed harness to witness that search, and now volunteered to submit his own person to the same ordeal, yet growling as he did so:

"Ef ary stealin's bin gwine on, boss, he's the p'izen thief! Durn him from hyar to yender! Didn't he grup me so tight I jest couldn't help me own self? Didn't he do the biggest heft o' the hold-up him own self, then? Be course he did, dug-gun him from tiptop to leaky bottom—yes!"

"You mean—whom?" asked the Man from Denver, quickly.

"Him as was on the box with me, be course, then! Him as tuck— What made him rack out in sech a bloody hurry ef 'twasn't fer fear o' bein' smoked fer what he shorely is: one o' the p'izen gang, then?"

"It's Heber Kane he's meanin', boss," volunteered one of the inside passengers, but with a sniff of scorn at the wild fancy.

"The fellow who rode off on the buckskin nag?"

"Jest him! An' he's mighty nigh as white as they make 'em, too, you want to know, boss! Why, sir, thar isn't a better knowed man in all the Black Hills than Heber Kane, who fust opened up the Hobgoblin Mine!"

Reddy Wilson turned away with growling threats, and as Alda Copeland assisted her uncle into the stage, now little better than a helpless bundle of shaken nerves since his last hope had failed him, Gayworthy himself fell to work with hearty good will at the disabled rigging, pressing the four men into service as well.

With so many willing hands at work, matters were rapidly adjusted, and first wrapping the body of the road-agent up in a horse-blanket, it was hoisted to the roof of the stage, there bound securely to the iron railing.

Altering the harness to suit, the surviving wheel-horse was put in the lead, with the other span as wheelers; then the King-Pin Sport sprang into his saddle to act as escort to the coach.

Apparently he had banished from his mind all thoughts of the loss so agitatedly bewailed by old man Copeland, and more than once as the stage rolled briskly onward the Man from Denver let fall a comforting or an encouraging word at the lowered window, meant for Alda Copeland even more than for her half-stupefied uncle.

Only once did the old man rally from that despairing stupor, stirred, it seemed, by the repeated mention of Heber Kane as the four men discussed the preposterous notion taken by Reddy Wilson.

Suddenly leaning forward until his white head and pale face seemed framed by the open window, Mr. Copeland huskily spoke:

"Find my—regain what I lost, sir, and I'll reward you—I'll give you anything else I own on earth!"

"I'll do the best I know how, sir, without any pay," assured Gayworthy.

"Pay—I'll pay you whatever—I'll give you this!" the old man cried, fumbling in his bosom, then bringing forth a paper or two, as he added: "See! bear witness, all! I'll give him these—the title-deeds to the Hobgoblin Mine, if he'll only recover my lost—if he'll find for me that plug of black navy tobacco!"

With an apologetic murmur and a sorely troubled look, Alda Copeland drew her relative back from the open window, gently replacing those documents in his bosom as the old man again collapsed, lying back in his seat a mere bundle of clothes and human misery.

The King-Pin Sport gravely nodded his comprehension, then reined his good steed a little to the rear, rightly judging that the sorely-shaken old gentleman would be all the better for lack of seeing his face just then.

Although hopelessly behind schedule time, Reddy Wilson was making the best of it, tooling the "hearse" swiftly along that comparatively level stretch of road, while the Man from Denver trotted quietly along a trifle in the rear.

Then the nature of the country began to change for the worse, and as the stage rattled on between high walls of shrub-dotted stone, there came the spiteful crack of gun or pistol, and with a sharp cry Ten-strike Tom pitched heavily out of his saddle, like a dead man!

CHAPTER IV.

A BRISK LITTLE SKIRMISH.

ALTHOUGH the Man from Denver was seemingly deep buried in thought as he rode in the rear of the rumbling stage-coach, he had passed through far too many wild and thrilling scenes to ever wholly drop his guard; and just one fleeting second before that treacherous shot came to waken the echoes, his keen gaze caught a glimpse of both gun and human head, parting yonder bit of vine-clad shrubbery far up the rocks.

Just a glimpse, but that proved quite sufficient for one of his quick wit and trained muscles, and before that instant had expired, Ten-strike Tom was plunging sideways from his saddle, with right hand seeking revolver-butt!

He felt the wind of that murderously-aimed shot as he fell, but his action was so swiftly taken that death was cheated, for the time being.

The Man from Denver struck the stony trail in a rubber-like bunch, and as he did so, up rose his good right hand with speaking gun, sending shot after shot straight into yonder little blue cloud of powder-smoke.

With cat-like activity Gayworthy rolled over twice, then gathered himself for a swift leap to the rocks almost directly beneath the spot from whence that treacherous shot had been sped, sharply shouting to the startled fellow upon the box:

"Drive on, you! Never mind about me, but drive ahead and save your live freight, man!"

From above came an ugly cry of savage rage as the would-be assassin realized how neatly his aim had been foiled, and another shot hissed past the neck of the swiftly moving Sport, flattening harmlessly upon the rocky trail.

Like an echo came a shot from Gayworthy's revolver, and then he began nimbly scaling the precipitous wall, clinging closely to the rocky face and availing himself of each friendly point of cover, at the same time sending an occasional shot whistling upward through that smoke-stained vine, more to prevent the assassin from securing a certain shot at himself than because he expected to count a *coup* in turn.

An abrupt bend in the trail carried the stage out of sight, but the Man from Denver never cast a second glance in that direction, seeming to care little or nothing about being backed up by the male passengers whom he had already served so ably.

It proved to be no slight task Gayworthy had set himself, for at that point the wall was nearly perpendicular, and at places he could only advance at all by using both arms to draw his body after.

But no other shot came from the point above, and though this seemed fairly positive proof that the enemy had fled in haste, the King-Pin Sport never for an instant slackened his efforts, scrambling up the wall as best he might, holding only one end in view: how he might play even for those treacherous attempts upon his life.

As he drew nearer to the place from whence those shots had come, Ten-strike Tom became convinced that his prey had

sought safety in flight, else other and more surely aimed bullets would have disputed his further approach, for now he was forced to fully expose his person for lack of cover.

Just as he reached forth a hand to grasp the vine-clad bushes from behind which the shots had sped, Gayworthy heard an encouraging shout from the stage-trail below, and looking back he saw the four inside passengers coming to his aid, if necessary.

"It's all right, so far, gentlemen," he called over a shoulder as he clutched a bush, then swung himself up to the rocky ledge. "Just hold your level yonder while I take a look—"

"Shell we come up, boss?"

Ten-strike Tom took a keen look ahead and beyond ere making reply to this eager question; then he called back:

"No, gents! It's hardly worth while. The rascal has skinned out in a holy hurry, judging from— Don't bother, then!"

The King-Pin Sport hardly knew what were the last words passing his lips, just then, for as he spoke he caught sight of man and horse in rapid motion, crossing a little valley which lay beyond the rocky ridge he had just scaled.

Little more than a glimpse it was, too, yet during that fleeting instant Thomas Gayworthy saw enough to bring a bright glitter into his jet-black eyes, to turn his red lips curling back from his strong white teeth for a brief space.

Just the one glimpse, then the horseman passed beyond his limited range of vision, rounding a convenient point of rocks, to reappear no more.

Thomas Gayworthy drew a long breath, then turned backward to nod cheerily unto the inside passengers below, calling out as he did so:

"It's pretty much as I thought, mates; the rascal has racked out for healthier regions, and as there's no red paint spilled at this end of the alley, we're both out our cartridges!"

"Who was it? Can't we run him down?" asked one of the men below.

"Not unless you've got a hound's nose for a blind trail, pardner! It's all rocks this way, and not a hide nor hair in sight!"

"And you never plugged him?"

"'Twas blind shooting, remember, and I'd be wondering stronger if I had raised hide, either time," lightly answered the Sport, quickly throwing out his empty shells and replacing them with fresh cartridges. "Now I'm up here, reckon I'll go around the barn as the shortest way home. I might take a tumble down here, but I'd hate to cheat my insurance companies! So, I'll pick you up long before you can make the next station, gentlemen!"

"If you're going after that devil—"

"But I'm not even thinking of it, pardner," with another laugh. "He's clean out of sight, and I'm only going to make a circle to the trail, down yonder. So-long! See you a bit later, lads!"

With that the Man from Denver passed from their sight, picking his way swiftly over the rocks and stones until he gained the edge of the little valley below, in which he had caught a fleeting glimpse of his would-be assassin.

Although he held very little doubt but that the horseman whom he had sighted so briefly was indeed the rascal who tried so hard to lay him out in the stage-trail a corpse, Ten-strike Tom was far too old a hand at such perilous work to neglect any just precaution, and his gun was ever ready for another snapshot in case of need, and rapidly though he picked his way among those rocks, he was wholly on guard against a possible ambuscade.

Nothing of that kind came to the surface, however, and when once out from those rocks, where he had plenty of room for action in case of need, the Man from Denver cut very little more time to waste.

Quartering his ground pretty much as a well-trained pointer or setter hunts a likely bit of stubble for game, Gayworthy was only a few minutes in hitting off the scent he wished, then bending low over the fresh trail of shod hoofs.

The nature of the soil favored his search, just there, and passing from track to track the Man from Denver seemed making a study for use in the future, now and then letting fall a muttered word or brief sentence, as

men will who have spent many long weeks at a time in solitude.

Broken and disconnected though those mutterings would appear if set down as they came, enough passed the trail-hunter's lips to make one point perfectly clear: he felt fully convinced that he could identify that horse wherever and whenever met.

"Enough for that, anyway!" Gayworthy muttered as he rose erect, casting a keen, sweeping glance around, but without sighting aught to cause him worry or fear. "I'll know the nag, and I wouldn't make many bones about swearing to the rider, either!"

Paying no further attention to the trail, he turned away in a direction to suit the survey he had taken before crossing that difficult ridge, and walking swiftly Ten-strike Tom hastened along to make the stage-trail once more.

This he succeeded in doing with only a modicum of rock-work, and at sound of his clear, shrill whistle, the well-trained black horse came trotting around the curve to meet its loved master.

Gayworthy caressed the animal for a moment, then gave it a quick but thorough inspection, nodding his head in grim satisfaction as he muttered:

"Good enough, old fellow! In missing the goose I didn't know but what our sharp-shooting friend o' the rocks had hit the gander! You're sound in limb as you are in wind, and so—gee-up, my hearty!"

Vaulting lightly from ground to saddle without touching foot to stirrup, Ten-strike Tom gave the gallant black his head and with loose rein galloped along the curving trail in friendly pursuit of the stage-coach.

Traveling light as he did, it was not many minutes ere the King-Pin Sport caught sight of the stage, surrounded by a little cloud of curling white dust as Reddy Wilson sent his oddly-arranged team spinning along at a more than fair gait; and a grim smile curled the jetty mustaches of the Man from Denver as he penetrated that dusty veil.

"That looks more like business, for a fact! If I was a gent of the road, I'd take a second thought before tackling an outfit with so many teeth in readiness to bite!"

Two of the male passengers were squatting on the roof of the stage with Winchester rifles at a ready, and from each window showed armed hands, each muzzle turned backward to cover the coming horseman!

Ten-strike Tom lifted his hat in a gay flourish, at the same time sending his clear voice in advance:

"Flag of truce, gentlemen! I'd rather turn back for a fresh start than let you waste your cartridges on such poor game!"

Instead of bullets, cheers came back, and laughing cheerily the Man from Denver came on, only slackening his pace as he drew alongside the vehicle.

For a few minutes he was kept busy answering the questions with which he was pelted by the curious men, but he contrived to satisfy all without so much as mentioning what he had learned while studying the trail in yonder little valley.

Cephas Copeland roused up a bit from the stupor which had fallen upon him after abandoning all hope of recovering the treasure he had so mysteriously lost; but when he found there was no fresh hope coming from that quarter, he lapsed into silence, moaning faintly as he half-lay against the shoulder of his young and pale-faced niece.

Alda Copeland looked anxious, and, stranger though he surely was, Ten-strike Tom read a piteous appeal in her big blue eyes.

"It's not so very far to the next station, Miss Copeland, and when once there I think all will come out well," he ventured to whisper as he rode close alongside the coach.

"I hope so, but, uncle seems ill—very ill!" murmured the maiden, in broken tones.

Thomas Gayworthy could see as much for himself, now, but as that illness came from a mental shock rather than from any physical infirmity, he knew there was little could be done then.

"You will have to lie over at the next station, Miss Copeland. A good night's rest will build up your uncle's nerves. I hardly think he has anything more serious the matter with him."

Copeland stirred uneasily at this whispered conversation, and lest his malady

should be increased rather than lessened, Gayworthy drew back with an encouraging nod, and nothing further passed between the couple until after the next relay station was reached.

Here fresh horses were waiting the stage, and while the exchange was being made, Reddy Wilson profanely explained what had happened.

With little more than the ordinary delay, the stage was in readiness for the road, but as Reddy Wilson mounted the box, two of his passengers so far were lacking.

Cephas Copeland appeared far too ill for further travel, just then, and as a matter of course, Alda remained as his companion.

Thomas Gayworthy assisted the broken old man from stage to station, leaving him only when placed upon a fairly clean bed, with Alda installed as nurse.

"I'll keep within easy reach in case my aid is needed, Miss Copeland," was his parting assurance. "If it should be, don't hesitate to summon me, please. For, if I should fail a lady in distress, my wife—Heaven bless her!—would never acknowledge her husband again!"

This apparently superfluous information was shrewdly thought of, for Alda gave a sigh of relief, at once losing her former air of embarrassed restraint as she promised to call upon him if necessary.

With face graver than customary with one of his gay and careless disposition, Ten-strike Tom passed out of doors, where he met the station-keeper, who showed a troubled visage to match his speech:

"Mighty pore quarters fer the likes o' you—all, boss! Reckon you'll be sorry you didn't rack out 'long o' the hearse—that's what!"

"Oh, no! You've feed for my horse, and what's good enough accommodation for him, will suit me clear up to the nines!"

CHAPTER V.

FINDING MORE THAN SHE SOUGHT.

THERE was little rest or comfort for Alda Copeland in that halting, and for hours after the Deadwood stage rolled away under the guidance of Reddy Wilson; her time and attention was wholly absorbed by the old man, her uncle.

The events of that day had aged him years in seeming, and while he never, even in his wildest lamentations, let fall aught which could have enlightened the maiden as to the precise nature of his heavy loss, his moans and his ravings were terribly trying, even to a loving niece.

With marvelous patience Alda bore with the old man, soothing him by words and by actions, forcing a cheerfulness which she could hardly have experienced herself, and never tiring of assuring her uncle that his loss would be remedied and all made well ere long.

The day waned and night came without bringing much if any improvement in the condition of Cephas Copeland, and when, after the rudely prepared but plentiful supper was over, Thomas Gayworthy again made his inquiries only to receive about the same answer, his open brow clouded and he began to wonder if, after all, medical aid ought not to be sought without further delay.

Alda smiled faintly as he made this suggestion, and stepping aside from the doorway in which she had been standing, motioned for him to enter the rudely-furnished chamber.

Cephas Copeland was moaning and muttering faintly as he lay upon that wretched couch, his face looking flushed and feverish, while there was a wild, almost insane glitter in his white-browed eyes as they turned toward the door at the slight sounds caused by that entrance.

Barely long enough for the Man from Denver to take such notes, then recognition came, and quickly lifting his body to a sitting position, the old man stretched forth both hands as he huskily spoke:

"You have found them? You bring them—Ah! Stolen! Tricked! All gone—all lost!"

That abrupt change was due to a negative motion made by the King-Plin Sport, and falling back upon his pillow, Cephas Copeland hid his face there, shivering and groaning bitterly.

Gayworthy advanced to speak quickly, giving the old man assurance that his property should be restored in good time, then bluntly scolding him for making matters so much worse than there was any occasion for.

"You are worrying yourself into a fever, Mr. Copeland, to say nothing of the unnecessary trouble you are giving this lady. If should need your assistance—which now seems more than likely—how am I to get it? Your loss may be made complete through this very folly; don't you see, my dear sir?"

With these crisp sentences as a sort of opening wedge, Ten-strike Tom kept hammering away until he had the old man in a far more reasonable state of mind, and only desisted when Mr. Copeland fairly pledged himself to worry no longer, but to compose himself to sleep, the better to play whatever part might be assigned him on the morrow.

Through all this Gayworthy was encouraged by the grateful looks and gestures of the fair nurse, who kept herself well out of the range of her relative's eyesight; and after carrying his main point, the Man from Denver fairly blushed as he received Alda's warm thanks when the chamber door was briefly closed behind them.

"If he can only get a fair amount of sleep, Miss Copeland, he'll be all right in the morning," was Gayworthy's parting assurance; and the maiden seemed acting upon that theory after her return to the bedside.

The task proved to be easier than she had dared hope for.

Cephas was greatly braced up by that call from his newly-found friend and champion, and already he was preparing to secure that necessary repose.

By his orders Alda measured out and administered a certain quantity of morphine, and then the old man lay back upon his pillows, forcing himself to quiet.

He seemed never to give a thought to Alda or her weariness, and on her part the maiden seemed content to wait and watch, turning the light lower as the old man breathed more regularly.

Alda scarcely changed her position for a full hour, and then only with the greatest caution, fairly holding her breath in check as she bent over her uncle to ascertain whether or no slumber had come in answer to that powerful drug.

Surely he was lost in slumber!

She gently touched an arm, she softly whispered his name, then repeating both with greater confidence.

Not a sound, not a movement came in response. Cephas Copeland lay there like one ready for the shroud, save for the regular rise and fall of his narrow chest.

Not until then did the maiden dare to move freely, but, satisfied at length that his sleep was too profound for easy breaking, she stood by his side and gazed long and steadily into his haggard features, low murmurings falling from her lips at brief intervals, hands tightly clasping together, bosom heaving with strong emotions.

Finally Alda bent lower until her trembling lips just touched that damp brow, after which she turned and passed noiselessly from the chamber.

When outside, the maiden paused to listen, holding her breath the while; but all was silent about the station, and with her fears thus lulled, she descended to the ground floor, passing out under the twinkling stars without causing any disturbance or meeting with any hinderance whatever.

The hour was well along toward midnight, but Alda did not seem to think of danger to herself as she sped along through the blending light and shadows, leaving the station behind her, looking ahead instead of to the rear.

The young woman had passed out of sight of the rude buildings which formed that relay station, although a scream from her would even yet have reached the ears of those beneath its roof; but as her eager eyes caught sight of a dim, phantom-like shape among the shadows ahead, Alda cautiously called forth:

"Is it you, Philo, dear?"

An answer came, but the words were not very distinct. Still the maiden never once suspected danger to herself, and with a low, glad cry, she hurried forward, to be

tightly clasped in strong arms, a moment later.

"Philo—brother!" she murmured; then she seemed to realize her terrible mistake, and with a gasping cry essayed to break away from those enveloping arms.

"Quiet, you silly fool!" rumbled a stern, deep voice as she was held helpless by an arm, while a broad palm was closed over her mouth just in time to smother her wild scream of angry fright. "If not Philo, I'm somebody enough sight better, so—Quiet, I say!"

Heeding the maiden's desperate struggles scarcely more than he might those of a feeble infant, the fellow hurried away through the night, with Alda tight-clasped to his broad breast, still keeping that suffocating palm over her lips.

A brief space thus, then a warning so-ho! broke from his lips as a half-frightened snort came from the edge of a clump of shrubbery.

Quieting at this, the horse was quickly unfastened, and the kidnapper climbed clumsily into the saddle, hampered as he was by the weight of the still struggling maiden.

Once fairly seated in the saddle he sent the horse away at a gallop, shifting his captive to an easier position across his muscular thighs, at the same time speaking harshly:

"Will you play decent, little fool? I'm not going to hurt you, unless—unless you will have it that way!"

Alda set her keen little teeth deep into his palm as that clasp grew less firm, and with a savage oath the fellow jerked his hand away, thus giving her lips brief liberty.

Swiftly Alda made the most of that chance, screaming shrilly for help, at the same time striving all she knew how to break away from that crushing embrace.

Cursing viciously, the fellow caught her throat and squeezed it until all sounds were cut off, at the same time urging his horse ahead at a reckless pace, evidently wishing to leave the station as far behind them as possible before the alarm could spread.

His threats and menaces were savage enough, but if Alda heard them at all, she certainly did not give them heed, just then, her whole energies being devoted to escape from those loathsome arms.

All in vain, however, while that reckless gallop lasted, and when the snorting horse was finally reined in to a more moderate pace, the poor girl's struggles had apparently exhausted her bodily powers.

She lay limply across that strong arm, and only a faint gasping moan passed her lips as the abductor cautiously relaxed his smothering grip once more.

"That's a bit more like it, girl!" he gruffly muttered, as his steed came down to a walk. "What's the sense in kicking up such an infernal racket, when we can get along smoothly just as well?"

Alda stirred feebly, but though she seemed trying to speak, only an inarticulate murmur passed her lips.

"That's all right, my dainty darling," added the fellow, with a short and gruff chuckle as he bent his head a bit lower the better to view the face which lay against his broad bosom. "There's never a bit of harm coming your way unless you bring it on yourself. And if the old man plays white, you'll go back to him just as safe and sound as though you'd only taken this bit of a moonlight saunter in your dreams!"

Alda gasped again, but only the words "my uncle" were distinguishable by those listening ears.

"That's just it, my beauty!" quickly, eagerly cried the kidnapper as he interpreted her meaning to suit himself. "Your uncle—yes! If he acts white, and comes to meet my terms half-way, even—If?" with sudden ferocity in both voice and face. "If? He's just got to, or you'll pay the penalty, little fool!"

As though stirred to fresh fury by the thoughts aroused by those words, the abductor dug heels sharply into the flanks of his horse, once more racing swiftly on through the night, holding his captive impotent the while, and only drawing rein after a stumble came perilously near to hurling all in a crippled heap upon the stones which now plentifully bestrewed their way.

Through all this Alda Copeland had lain so quiet, so helplessly in his arms, that her cap-

tor evidently began to fear lest he had seriously harmed her through that fierce restraint, and pulling his mount to a halt where there were no shadows to interfere with an examination, he slackened his grip and shifted his fair burden to the better meet that view.

But this proved to be the very chance that Alda was waiting for, and throwing all her strength into the effort, she writhed out of that slackened embrace, falling to the ground, but recovering as swiftly, to dart from light into shadow before the ruffian could make any effort to retrieve his mistake.

Only for a few seconds did that surprise last; then he urged his horse in hot pursuit, mingling savage threats with his commands for Alda to surrender.

"You can't slip me, you little fool!" he cried, as he wrenched the head of his snorting steed around to foil a swift double on the part of the fleeing maiden. "Stop, I say! Give me more trouble and I'll take my pay out of your—stop, you idiot!"

He swung low in the saddle with clutching fingers, but, just as he seemed on the point of gripping his prey, the maiden doubled again, flashing around a moss-grown boulder against which the horse fairly stumbled, both man and beast nearly coming to earth together.

Rallying quickly, the ruffian once more sped on in vicious pursuit with imprecations streaming across his hot lips; and as Alda felt her strength failing her, she cried aloud in her desperation, hoping even against all hope that aid might come in time to save her from that desperate villain.

"Help, brother! Oh, Philo! Oh, Jay—save me—save me!"

"I'll save you, fool!" harshly cried the ruffian as he again swung low in the saddle with straining arm and hand; only to be foiled as before, Alda making another swiftly adroit double, now turning back and fairly running away from the plunging animal and its master.

Again and again she screamed for help, now calling upon Philo, then pronouncing another name still dearer to her ears; but, once again that relentless pursuer was upon her track, and once again those plunging hoofs were casting dirt and leaves fairly against the fugitive, so short was the distance between them.

"Now I have got ye!" cried the ruffian as he forged alongside, fingers closing upon a portion of her drapery. "I'll make ye pay double for all—"

"Help! Oh, Jay—Philo!" shrieked the terrified maiden, falling to earth as her powers suddenly failed her, that fall tearing her sleeve and leaving but a fluttering fragment in the iron grip of her persecutor.

He reined up his horse with another savage execration; but, just as he was wheeling to ride back, a stern shout came from ahead, and with the cry came a pistol-shot!

The ruffian flung up his arms as that bright flash rent the shadows ahead, and as his horse wheeled sharply, he seemed to sway dizzily in the saddle, giving back a hoarse cry but making no attempt to return shot for shot.

Crack-crack!

Two more shots came in such swift succession that they were blended in a single prolonged report, then the new-comer rushed forward at top speed, crying aloud as he came:

"Alda, darling! Is it— Where are you, pet?"

A barely articulate cry came from a little heap on the ground in the edge of a tree-shadow, but that sound was quite powerful enough to banish all thought of armed enemy from that brain, and with a glad yet choking cry, the rescuer wrenched up his horse and sprung out of the saddle.

"Alda, my precious! You are 'not'—Speak to me, darling!" he panted with intense emotion; but, as he bent over that little heap, a pair of trembling arms met about his neck, and glad sobs came from the maiden's lips as she was lifted from earth to the bosom of her lover!

"Oh, Jay, how glad I am to see you, at last!" she panted, huskily. "I thought when that awful man—"

"Who was he? Where is he, Alda?" asked the lover, swinging the girl partly behind himself as he glared around in quest of the ruffian.

CHAPTER VI.

HEBER KANE'S STREAK OF HARD LUCK.

As the spirited steed dashed away through the mingled light and shadows of that starlit night, its rider rallied far enough to clutch both mane and pommel, then sunk heavily forward with a choking groan, riding heavily and limply, like one who has received his death-burt.

One foot remained in its hooded stirrup, but the other swung limply to and fro as the frightened horse raced madly along through the night, and occasionally the spurred heel would strike flank or hip, lending new energy to those muscular limbs.

How far or how long that mad flight lasted, he who still held the saddle as surely as though alive and alert to his full peril, never fairly knew; but it came to an ending at last, far away from the scene of that foiled pursuit.

It was not until the night was spent and day had long been born that the man who had so audaciously attempted to abduct Alda Copeland returned to his senses.

For long hours he had been lying there upon the bare plain, his face upturned, his limbs awkwardly disposed, just as he had fallen from the saddle after so long a blind flight.

Lying thus, more than one soaring vulture had been attracted by the sight of a prospective feast, and as they slowly circled through the gray air above that motionless figure, craning their bare, ugly heads for a clearer view, they looked upon a far from uncomely face; for he who lay there stretched out like a corpse, was none other than he who had so boldly ridden off upon the dead road-agent's horse the day last spent: Heber Kane, of Deadwood!

With a long, gasping sigh, Kane opened his eyes at length, for a few moments staring dazedly up at the slowly floating clouds, then taking note of the soaring buzzards who wheeled away with discordant croaks as their anticipated feast turned to disappointment instead.

A low sneeze from hard by gave the reviving man a start, and turning his head a bit he caught sight of a buckskin-colored horse grazing not far off, and this sight served to quicken his scattered wits.

Rising to a sitting posture, Kane gave vent to a hollow groan as the sluggish blood rushed to his brain, and clasping both hands to his aching temples, he stared blindly ahead.

A stinging pain helped to clear both wits and eyes, and as he stared at the hands which dropped away from his head, Heber saw his fingers daubed with blood.

That recalled it all, and with a harsh exclamation he strove to spring to his feet, right hand mechanically fumbling for the ready revolver which he was so free to make use of in the past.

Instead, he fell forward upon his face, lying blinded by the rush of blood for a few moments.

Little by little his bodily and mental powers came back to him, however, and first making sure that no enemy was in sight, just then, Heber Kane crouched there in an awkward heap, hands clasping his bullet-scored head while he tried to clear away such mists as still lingered in his whirling brain.

Little by little it all came back to him, each event falling into place until the ominous chain was complete. And as he came to the present a low and vicious curse parted his dust-marked lips.

"Who was it she called out to? Who shot me like— Devil grill him for supper!"

Like one whose fears are freshly awakened; Kane began feeling of his head once more, flinching and groaning a bit as his fingers parted the blood-matted hair the better to probe that bullet-mark.

The missile had cut a furrow along his skull, laying bare the bone but doing naught worse than stunning the ruffian.

Winced as he did so, Heber Kane assured himself that the skull was still sound, and when he found that nothing more serious than a flesh-wound had befallen him, his spirits began to rise a bit.

Binding a handkerchief tightly around his head as the only aid he could give his injured scalp at present, Heber Kane rose to his feet

and staggered over to where the buckskin gelding was grazing.

The animal made no effort to flee from the master whom he had lingered by for so many long hours, and leaning against it, with head resting upon the saddle, Heber Kane finally rallied his powers.

He felt a hungry gnawing at his stomach, and knew that at least a portion of his dizzy weakness was owing to the lack of food. He had not eaten a bite since early the morning before.

Lifting his head and staring half-bewilderedly around him, the man tried to cipher out his present location, but with poor success.

He had hardly the ghost of an idea as to how long and how far he had been borne by the buckskin gelding before dropping out of the saddle, and he certainly failed to recognize any of the landmarks then within his range of vision.

"Maybe I can sight something from yonder," he muttered, his gaze resting at last upon a rock-strewn hill something like a couple of miles distant. "I ought to be able to locate the station from there, but—would I dare go there, though?"

Making an almost savage gesture at that ugly doubt, Kane yanked up the head of the buckskin gelding, put foot in stirrup, and then slowly swung himself into the saddle.

"If I had a bit of solid chuck! Or only a swallow of forty-rod!" he muttered, disgustedly, as that old dizziness once more sent a red mist before his eyes and turned him sick at the stomach.

But the brisk motion through the cool, crisp air of that forenoon quickly served to strengthen the injured man, and long before his good steed had covered the ground lying between them and yonder rocky hill, Heber Kane was almost himself again.

Choosing a point where it looked as though he might be able to ride up the hill to its summit, Kane quickened his pace in his anxiety to fairly locate himself; but just as he left the level, passing between a couple of patches of scrubby timber, fresh trouble came upon him.

An indistinctly seen shape sprung out from the cover to his right hand, and before Kane could make a move to defend himself, the coil of a deftly cast lariat fell over his head, the well-greased noose drawing tight around his neck and then viciously plucking him from the saddle!

Fortunately for himself, however, that noose included an arm, thus relieving his neck of the most dangerous strain, else Heber might never have known why or by whom he had been assaulted.

As it was, the fall itself was quite sufficient to knock all the fight out of him, and before he could make any show of struggling, that strong rope was wound in many coils about his body, pinning both arms to his sides, rendering him absolutely helpless.

Then unceremonious hands dragged him to a convenient tree, bracing his back against the gnarled trunk for the time being.

Gasping painfully for breath and winking rapidly in the effort to clear away the dust from his eyes, Kane tried to recognize those faces before him; but without success.

One and all were perfect strangers, and it is by no means certain whether the bound man was most gratified or disappointed by that fact.

In those first half-blind moments it seemed as though at least a half-dozen faces were dancing before his imperfect vision, but as his sight grew clearer, Heber Kane saw that he had been captured by two men, only.

"Gittin' better, be ye?" grimly demanded one of that pair, bending in front of the bound man, showing his teeth as he spoke.

"Better enough to pull hemp, I reckon!" growlingly chimed in the second cowboy; for such their garb and equipment proclaimed them.

"I don't— What have I done to be treated so like a dog?" huskily demanded Kane, plucking up courage as he became convinced that these men were entire strangers to him.

"Didn't we ketch ye astraddle o' yer' buckskin?" fiercely demanded the first speaker flinging out a hand toward the ani-

mal named. "An' didn't ye lift him, fu'st, ye durn hoss-thief?"

Heber gave a great start at this, for he had not looked for an accusation of that sort. His face lightened up a bit as he caught at the truth, and then hastily exclaimed:

"I never—I swear I never stole a horse, gentlemen!"

"Nur we never didn't ketch ye atop o' him, nuther, did we, hey?"

"But if you'll only let me explain, gentlemen!" urged Kane, rallying still further, and hastily adding lest another interruption hinder his account: "I took that horse from—from a road-agent killed yesterday while holding up the stage for Deadwood!"

"Which?"

"Turn me loose and I'll tell you all!" eagerly cried the bound man.

"Durned ef he don't take us fer fools, Ike Dumphrey!" coarsely chuckled the taller of the cowboys. "Turn him loose, eh?"

"At the slip-end of a lariat, then, Duke Vinson!"

"That's what! An' the sooner we git a hump on, the quicker we kin git back to our cleaner work; eh, pardner?"

"Bet yer sweet life, mate!"

"Don't! Let me speak, first!" cried Heber Kane, flinching from those ruthless hands and swiftly beginning the story he had planned to tell.

"It's true, gentlemen! I was a passenger on the Deadwood stage, yesterday, when it was held up by road-agents. I was robbed of a heavy sum of money, and when a row followed—one of the rascals was killed, and the rest fled, leaving one horse behind them: yonder buckskin!"

"Spits 'er out jest as though he meant it, eh, Duke?"

"Born a-lyin', wasn't he, Dump?"

"It's gospel truth, gentlemen!" passionately vowed the prisoner, drops of cold sweat starting out over his brows as a suggestive pluck was given the noose which still clasped his chafed throat. "I jumped on that horse—it must have belonged to the road-agent we shot—and chased the other rascals, hoping to recover my money. Instead, I ran into an ambush, and was shot—look!" with a rapid nodding of the head to call attention to his blood-stained bandage. "See for yourselves, gentlemen! If that isn't good proof, then I don't—"

"Nur we don't, nuther, eh, pardner?" coldly uttered Ike Dumphrey, putting back the knife with which he had been sawing off a fresh quid of plug-tobacco. "Too durn thin, I'm votin'!"

"Me too, pardner!" grimly assented the other cowboy.

"I'll make oath before high Heaven, gentlemen!" cried the now thoroughly frightened prisoner, at the same time striving to loosen his bonds.

"Waal, we'll lift ye a few feet furdur towards that same seaport, pardner," coolly scoffed Dumphrey as he rose to his feet and hitched up his cartridge-studded belt. "An' to show the why: jest you pick open them two years o' yourn, stranger, an' hyar ye hev it—straight goods, too, d'ye mind!"

"Ye see that 'ar buckskin? Waal, he totes the C. Bar brand, don't he? An' he was lifted long with a when o' others, nigh upon two months ago, as the record shows!"

"But I never stole him; I swear I never stole him!"

"An' mebbe you'll sw'ar you never rid him, nuther? Mebbe you'll take your 'davy we didn't ketch ye a-straddle o' that same critter, too? Why wouldn't ye, eh? Lyin' goes mates with stealin', an' ef we was to hold back the rope ontel a horse-thief 'fessed up the truth of his own notion, the buzzards 'd go hungry mighty long, I'm tellin' ye, now!"

"An' I'm tellin' ye that we're wastin' a mighty heap o' wind an' valeble time, pardner," cut in the second cowboy with an air of impatient disgust. "We done ketched him red-handed, so to speak, an' ye know what the boss done left fer orders?"

"To make sure we hed the right cuss, then to rope 'im!"

"Bet yer sweet life! Waal, I'm dead sure he's our meat, pardner!"

"So'm I, Duke!"

"That settles it, then! Yender's a limb as'll answer the purpose, don't ye reckon, Ike?"

Kane gave a hoarse cry of fierce despair at this cool death-doing, but he strove in vain to free his arms sufficiently far to make a fight for life and liberty, and the cowboys hardly deigned to give him a look in passing while leading up the buckskin gelding.

"Sence he wanted a horse to ride so durn bad, reckon he kin ride to glory on the critter he lifted, eh, pardner?"

"That's whut! Steady, Buckskin! Now, lend us a lift, mate!"

While speaking, the cowboy had tossed a second lasso over the chosen limb, and letting the noose dangle above the gelding, he stooped to lift their prisoner from earth to saddle.

That proved to be no easy task for them, though both were muscular fellows, for Heber Kane fought as best he could against his fate. But, as the noose was slipped around his neck and strong hands grasped and drew it taut, he ceased his vain struggles. Then the word was spoken:

"Stiddy! Now—git up, you Buckskin!"

Stepping back, Ike Dumphrey struck the horse with his greasy hat!

CHAPTER VII.

MORE ABOUT THAT PLUG OF TOBACCO.

ALDA COPELAND gave a little cry of feminine fright at this warlike action of her lover, but neither pair of eyes could detect aught of that ruffianly stranger, and brief though the passage of time, it had been sufficiently long for the buckskin gelding to race out of hearing with its stunned master.

With neither sight nor sound to feed his fury, Jay Whittaker quickly calmed down, his care once more turning to the young woman about whose willing waist his left arm still clung.

"Who was it, Alda? How came he to—Surely he did not—"

Alda gave a shivering cry, clinging closer to the manly defender she had found in her sore extremity.

She found it nearly as awkward explaining as her lover did putting his questions into shape; but that feeling did not last long.

"I thought it was you, dear," she began, snuggling still closer to that loved protector. "You, or Philo, that is. And then, when I called out, to make sure, he answered; I thought he said yes! And then—I tried all I could to break away, Jay, but until just a little while ago he held me so awfully tight! But, I did manage to tear away from the brute, and ran until—until you came, dear!"

"Who was he? Did he say anything to let you know why he tried to carry you off, pet?"

"No, unless— He did say that it would be the worse for me unless Uncle Cephas—Oh! I wonder if it could—"

Alda gave a gasping breath as some new or amazing thought struck her, but she cut her startled speech short like one who dared not put the fancy squarely into words.

"You wonder what, Alda? What is it, dearest?" quickly asked Whittaker, his own tones betraying agitation, although that could hardly come from the same cause.

"I wonder if—oh, Jay, you don't think that dreadful man would meet Philo?" huskily asked the maiden, starting partly away from her lover to cast a swift glance around them.

"Philo?" echoed Whittaker, plainly ill at ease. "What makes you think of such a thing, Alda? Surely he isn't—"

"He is here, then? Where is brother, Jay? Why don't he come? Surely he couldn't have mistaken the time? I said this very night, and— You don't tell me, Jay?"

The maiden broke off abruptly at this point, her tones grown husky through a freshly awakened fear; and as Whittaker muttered something indistinct, Alda placed her hands upon his shoulders, looking straight up into his eyes.

The face was cast into deeper shadow by the slouch hat worn, yet her vision was sufficiently keen to take note of an unusual embarrassment there, and her breath came sharply as she next spoke:

"Where is my brother, Jay? He is not—not ill?"

"Of course not, pet," came the swift an-

swer as Jay once more slipped an arm around her waist, gently forcing the maiden toward the horse from whose back he had leaped to clasp her in his protecting arms. "He is well as ever in his life, and would have been here right now, only— Why, darling!" with a low, forced laugh, "I wonder if you have any idea how far you are from the relay station where we were to look for you?"

"Ugh! that horrible wretch!" panted Alda shivering with mingled anger and disgust at the ugly memories thus recalled.

"Why, little lady, you're miles and miles out of your way!" asserted Jay Whittaker, speaking rapidly, like one who wishes to cover over a less pleasant point. "And only for a wild chance which I was cursing to myself only a little bit ago, we might never have met until—"

Carried away by the ugly picture thus conjured up, Whittaker caught Alda closely to his broad bosom, raining hot kisses upon her face the while.

The maiden made little effort to break away this time; in fact, she really seemed to enjoy such sweetly rude treatment!

Whittaker was not acting now, although he could hardly have taken a surer method of changing the subject which, for some as yet unexplained reason, appeared to sorely embarrass him.

Alda gently drew back her head and half-averted her face, then she once more felt her feet as the lovers stood together near the waiting horse.

Whittaker seemed to feel it part of his duty to explain why he, too, had gone so far astray from the right course, in a few sentences lending the impression that it was owing solely to a little bother he had had about some stolen horses.

"I was hurrying the best I knew how to make the station, dearest, when I caught sound of your voice—not that I recognized it, then!"

"I was so awfully frightened, you know," murmured the maiden, apologetically. "Was it—did I screech so horribly, dear?"

"You couldn't if you tried, pet!" came the lovely assertion, and a warm kiss fell upon those upturned lips. "But of course I couldn't know it was you, until I saw—That infernal hound!" with fierce rage at the memory thus invoked. "I ought to have killed the cur! And I'll send him over the range, even yet, if ever I find him out!"

It was a rather lame explanation, but just then Alda was hardly in condition for analyzing his words, and in her turn she told how the bold stranger had snatched her up and borne her away through the night.

Enough was let fall between the lovers during those hurried explanations, to make it clear that an appointment of some description had been made for their meeting at or near the station where the Copelands had found refuge after the hold-up by road-agents.

It was clear, too, that Alda Copeland had fully expected to be joined there by her brother, Philo, and that such meeting was to be kept secret from their uncle, Cephas Copeland.

Jay Whittaker listened with undisguised interest to the explanation given by his loved one, only now and then interrupting her by a well-timed question or remark calculated to make her story clearer, and when she ceased speaking, he drew a breath of evident relief, saying:

"And now it's all over! This is the beginning of the end, isn't it, darling? No more skulking, no more playing off—eh?"

"No more, dear!" echoed the maiden, with a great sigh of relief. "I have felt so mean! I could hardly hold out until— But that's all at an end, now! Uncle can— Oh!"

A sharp, almost spasmodic cry escaped her lips, giving the lover a great start and causing him to grip revolver-butt as he looked fiercely around in quest of a possible enemy.

"Oh, it's gone—it's lost!" panted Alda, tearing at the bosom of her dress with frantic hands the while. "Oh, what will brother say?"

"What's gone? What have you lost, Alda?" asked Whittaker, his free hand grasping her arm as he spoke.

Either words or touch served to recall the maiden to her cooler wits, though she trembled violently as she leaned against that pro-

tecting arm. Then, in husky tones she spoke:

"I promised Philo to keep it a profound secret even from you, Jay, but now—I've lost it! Or—that wicked wretch!" with quickening energy. "Oh, he must have robbed me, Jay!"

"That devil? Robbed you—of what, Alda?"

"Oh—of—a plug of tobacco!"

"W-h-a-t?" ejaculated Whittaker, betraying such ludicrous surprise, not to say dismay, that the maiden burst into a hysterical fit of laughter which lasted for nearly a minute.

The young man supported his sweetheart, very much as a lover should in duty bound, but sorely disturbed though the girl certainly was, she could not fail to realize how awkwardly the man was feeling.

Choking down her emotions as quickly as possible, then, Alda spoke with more clearness.

"It was property belonging by rights to—brother," she said. "I was bringing it to him when that ruffian caught me. I didn't know—I forgot all about it until you spoke; but, it's gone! And he must have robbed me before—Oh, if Philo was only here now!"

Jay Whittaker gave a low, ugly growl as he gently freed his arm from those clinging fingers, glancing around them as he said:

"I surely hit the villain, Alda! Maybe—I ought to be able to find him somewhere nigh at hand!"

The young man sprung away in the direction he believed that horse had taken with its burden, at first paying but little attention to the faint appeals of the frightened maiden, who quickly followed her lover, keeping close by his side during that hasty search.

Whittaker failed to find aught of the human target through which he felt confident now that his lead had sped, nor did better success reward his expenditure of matches. And then, as he felt Alda shivering like one under a nervous chill, he cast aside the glowing match-end, one arm closing about her trembling shape as he spoke:

"It's no use now, dear, but I'll look it all up in the morning. You are worn out, and need rest, darling, so we'll go—"

"Oh, not back there!" shivered Alda, her tone verging upon hysterics as she clung to her lover. "He'd never forgive me for—Not back to the station, Jay!"

"Of course not, pet," was his soothing response, lifting her small yet plump and shapely figure in his strong arms, bearing her toward the waiting horse much as he might have carried a tired child. "I know of a handier shelter than that, Alda, where we decided to wait until—Ahem!"

"And Philo?" eagerly asked the maiden, her tones clearing at that. "He will be there? Brother will be waiting us there, Jay?"

"Of course, pet," came the lowered assurance, but there was a touch of that former strange embarrassment underlying the words. "Now—you can ride alone, or shall I hold you, dearest?"

Although his words took the form of a question, Jay Whittaker decided according to his own judgment, or in accordance with his own wishes.

Swinging himself into the saddle, he bent over and deftly swung the maiden clear of the ground, laughing lightly and touching her lips with his own as he settled the fair burden across his lap.

At touch of armed heel, the good horse moved away through the night at a moderate pace, and under more cheerful circumstances the lovers surely ought to have enjoyed the novel expedition.

But neither lover nor sweetheart felt at ease just then, for each one was holding a secret in reserve, both knowing that the whole truth surely must come out in the end, yet each one dreading the full disclosure.

For something like a couple of hours that night-ride lasted, Whittaker pushing deeper into the broken ground, yet seemingly at no loss as to the proper course to pursue.

Finally he drew rein among a mass of huge rocks, to utter:

"Right up yonder's the shelter I spoke of, Alda. It's rude enough as looks go, but not

nearly so bad at a pinch like this! And—it's the cabin of a friend your brother made, dear."

"And Philo: he is there?" eagerly asked Alda, yet shrinking with an odd shiver as she looked in the direction indicated by his hand.

"We'd better alight, dearest," said Whittaker, once more evading that question, and suiting the action to his words. "Maybe the nag could make it with us both on its back, but—now, my dainty pet! Pay toll!"

Lips met tips as he held the maiden poised in his strong arms for a few moments, then Whittaker placed his love gently upon her feet, retaining his clasp until she could suit herself to the altered situation.

Talking cheerily in lowered tones, Whittaker aided the girl up the steep and around a bare projection of gray rock until they could see the outlines of a low, rude shack nestling there against the high rocks behind; and pausing for the moment, Whittaker called out:

"Hello, the house!"

Dull echoes made reply, but never word or call came from the mountain cabin in response; and after waiting for a brief space, Whittaker repeated the summons, then adding the words:

"I say, Flick! I'm back again, with company for you, pardner!"

Still silence, and forcing a brief laugh, Whittaker moved on, saying:

"It's a rough diamond they call Go-easy Dan Flick, but I reckon he's gone off on one of his little tramps. That needn't bother us, though!"

"And Philo?" hesitatingly asked Alda, as her lover led her toward the rude entrance to the mountain shack. "He is—Why doesn't he answer you, dear? Surely you are not—Brother is—is well, Jay?"

"He surely was when we parted, pet," quickly asserted the young man, as he pulled a thong of rawhide which served to open the slab door. "If you'll just step inside, Alda, I'll have a light in a moment!"

The maiden obeyed, standing in silence while her lover struck match and ignited a candle which was stuck into a black bottle, resting on a rude shelf above the spacious fireplace. But Alda gave a low, gasping cry as she caught sight of her lover's face, so pale and stern-set!

"Brother—Oh, Jay, what has become of Philo?" she panted, huskily.

"I'd give my right hand if I could only tell you, darling!" vowed Whittaker, as he clasped her failing form in his strong arms.

CHAPTER VIII.

TEN-STRIKE TOM ON THE TRAIL.

THOMAS GAYWORTHY could appreciate the luxuries of life as thoroughly as any man living, so long as his life-lines were dropped in pleasant places; but then, too, he could rough it with the toughest when necessity obliged.

So it was that, having done the best he could for his newly-found friends, the Copelands, he gave a parting look to his good steed, then turned in for a sound night's slumber.

But the fates were against that portion of the programme, and it was yet hours before the new day would dawn that an interruption came.

"Hello, yourself!" retorted the King-Pin Sport in answer to that rude summons.

"You, is it, Knifton?"

"That's what!" gruffly answered the station-keeper, whose combination of fist and voice had rung the alarm through that closed door.

"All right, if you can only make it look that way, my hearty!" said the Man from Denver, rolling off his rude cot and pulling on his boots: the only portion of his dress which had been discarded for the night.

"Tain't so mighty much me, boss, as 'tis that ole feller who—"

"Mr. Copeland, you mean?"

"Ef that's his handle, yes," assented the keeper with a growl as Gayworthy flung his door wide and stepped forth, ready for whatever business might turn up.

"What's the matter with him, then?"

"You tell! Durned ef I know how! Any-way, he's gittin' in a mighty bad way, ef

gruntin' an' howlin' counts fer keeps! An' so—Waal, I didn't know jest what ort to be did, an' so—thar was you, boss!"

"And the young lady: Miss Copeland?" asked Ten-strike Tom as he moved toward the station proper, he having "bunked in" above the stalls in one of which his good horse had found entertainment for the night.

"Thar's jest what!" fairly exploded Knifton, with a vehement gesture by way of adding emphasis to speech. "Whar is she? What's come o' her? You say, fer durned ef I know how!"

"What!"

"That's jest what, ef it breaks my fool neck!" doggedly added the station-keeper. "When I found the ole man was in sech a terrible way, I reckoned the gal ort to know 'bout it. An' so—when I went whar she was, she jest wasn't—so thar!"

Knifton's tongue seemed pretty well tangled up, just then, but his meaning was clear enough to the Man from Denver, whose nimble legs had by this time carried him to the front entrance to the station, where he paused to grip an arm tightly as he spoke, sharply:

"You're fairly awake, old fellow? This isn't an ugly dream, eh?"

"Make it come out otherways ef ye kin, boss," sulkily answered the keeper, nodding his head in the direction from whence came odd sounds. "Thar's the ole gent, sicker'n a hog! An' whar's the gal? Durned ef I kin turn her up, do my levelest—so thar!"

As the most likely method of solving what bade fair to prove a mystery of moment, Gayworthy hurried on until he stood by the bed where Cephas Copeland was rolling and tossing, groaning and talking like a man in feverish delirium; but there was no sign of Alda Copeland, who surely ought to have been roused from slumber by those ravings.

The sick man gave a start and a sharp gasp as his eyes opened in response to the firm hand-clasp which the Man from Denver gave his arm, and with an air of genuine relief Gayworthy saw that, after all, matters might have been a vast deal worse.

That Copeland was far from well, went without saying; but his ravings which had so frightened Frank Knifton, the station-keeper, were mainly born of a nightmare fancy, and now that he saw a friendly face, Cephas Copeland looked and acted more naturally.

Ten-Strike Tom brought him a cup of fresh water from the spring hard by, and then assured himself that the old gentleman was in no actual danger, although he was far from being a thoroughly sound and well person.

Without actually putting the question, Gayworthy managed to glean the fact that Alda had not been seen by her uncle since he fell into his first sound sleep, after taking his morphine powder.

Leaving the old man somewhat relieved, Ten-strike Tom questioned the station-keeper as to where the young lady had been quartered for the night, after which he paid a brief visit to that little chamber.

It proved to be untenanted, nor was there anything to prove that the maiden had even crossed the threshold, although that was taken for granted. Still, she certainly had not disturbed the bed.

Failing to learn aught here, Ten-strike Tom passed out of the building, baring his head to the gentle but cool night-air, trying to decide upon his next step.

It seemed hardly probable that Alda, a complete stranger in that wild region, would have left the house for any reason, without at least letting some one know of her intention, as a safeguard against possible accidents.

"Still, she isn't in the station," mused the Man from Denver, slowly advancing, looking keenly around as he did so. "Since she has gone, how? Of her own accord, or—could any of those imps have stolen her away?"

On the face of it this last wonder seemed ridiculously improbable, and Ten-strike Tom himself would have so pronounced it, only for recalling what Cephas Copeland had revealed concerning his hidden store of precious stones.

Might it not be that the road-agents, foiled in securing what they hoped to win by playing that game, had contrived to abduct the niece as a still surer method of stripping the uncle?

"I don't see how they could have got her away without kicking up a row loud enough to awaken the house, though! And yet—she is missing, and that's flat!"

While trying to cipher out the fresh mystery, Ten-strike Tom passed still further away from the station, now looking keenly around, seeking for a possible solution by the bright starlight, then letting his gaze sweep the ground as he puzzled over that dark enigma.

Then, stopping short, he uttered a low, eager cry, to sink upon his knees a moment later!

"A fresh track!" he muttered, straining his eyes the more surely to interpret that sign aright. "A hoof-mark—of a shod horse! And— Go easy, Thomas, lad!"

Striking a match and covering the glow of it with his hat, thus casting a double light upon the torn ground itself, the Man from Denver studied that imperfect print with an interest such as only a born man-hunter can ever fully experience.

The match burned out before he was fully satisfied, but leaving that particular track for the time being, Ten-strike Tom passed along the fairly plain trail until at another impression which seemed to give him better satisfaction.

Striking another match and shading it as before, Gayworthy made the discovery he had half anticipated, lifting his head with a grim grunt as the little torch burned down to his fingers.

"It's the buckskin, safe enough!" was his muttered comment. "When I studied it out back yonder," with a nod of his head toward the distant ridge of rocks from whence the ambushed enemy had so narrowly missed taking his life, "I knew I'd recognize the track if it ever came my way again. And here— Steady, Thomas!"

Stooping low over that trail, the Man from Denver passed along until he met with another important discovery: a fresh trail!

Another match was called into requisition, and lasted long enough for those keen eyes to make out a slender track, the pointed toe and high heel of which but too clearly denoted a woman's foot!

A little further on he stopped again where the light was clearest. He did not light another match, for he could see sufficient to tell that right here the woman's trail ended; for right there the horseman had caught her up in his arms!

Glancing at his watch, Ten-strike Tom calculated the length of time which must elapse before dawn could lend him its assistance, then slowly retraced his steps to the station.

Having spent so many of his mature days amid wild scenes and desperate episodes, Thomas Gayworthy's brain acted swiftly, and though it took less than a couple of minutes to carry him back to the station where the keeper was awaiting him, he had settled upon his proper line of action, and lost no time in getting down to business.

He briefly told Knifton of the discovery he had made, and declared his purpose of taking up the trail and following it to the end.

"Don't you let on to the old gentleman, pardner," he added, crisply. "Keep him as quiet as you can, and lie like a whitehead if you can't satisfy him any other way. Now—put me up a hunch of chuck and a flask of whisky just as quick as the law allows!"

"But you hain't gwine by your lonesome, boss?"

"Never you rack your brain over me, pardner, but get a hustle on!" impatiently retorted the Man from Denver.

While Knifton was hurriedly putting up a substantial lunch, Gayworthy cautiously approached the chamber where lay Cephas Copeland, giving a grunt of grim satisfaction as he found the old gentleman once more lost in a fairly peaceful slumber.

Retracing his steps, he made his horse ready for the road, and when he led the black steed up to the front of the station, he found the keeper in readiness with his provisions.

"That's all right, and to guard against accidents—catch!" curtly said the Man from Denver, as he tossed the man a yellow coin, then added: "Mind about the old gentleman, Knifton, and if I should need any help, I'll look to you first of all!"

Without waiting for reply or comment,

the King-Pin Sport wheeled his horse and rode rapidly away, but drawing rein when fairly hidden from the eyes of the station-keeper.

Leaving the saddle as he came to the point where he had abandoned the trail shortly before, Gayworthy slowly but surely lifted the tracks, followed by his well-trained animal.

It was slow and trying work, but the Man from Denver had counted the cost, and knowing from experience that slow but sure was a mighty good motto to follow in such an emergency, he doggedly stuck to his task, now and then using a match where the trail grew indistinct, and the gray of dawn found him still upon the spoor of that doubly-laden horse.

After this his progress was more rapid, although time was lost on more than one occasion where the trail crossed particularly unfavorable ground; and then, when the sun was well above the eastern hills, the Man from Denver lost the spoor entirely.

After vainly searching for the trail for an hour, Gayworthy gave over the task, taking the general direction of the trail instead, and riding forward along that line at a brisk pace, yet not too fast for noting a trail should good luck bring him across it once more.

But it seemed as though no such good luck was in store for him, since the minutes grew into hours without bringing any such discovery, and finally concluding that further search for the trail would be a mere waste of time, the Man from Denver turned toward a rocky ridge, meaning to scale one of the points to sweep the country thus laid bare before his eyes.

He had only partly won the point he had fixed upon as the best for his purpose, when Gayworthy made a discovery which brought a vivid spark into his eyes and caused his jetty mustaches to curl away from his strong white teeth.

Less than half a mile distant, at the edge of the plain which lay broad and open before his gaze, the Man from Denver caught sight of a little group of living beings: of men, and of horses, both!

From that first position he could not precisely read the situation, but by a slight change of place he made out this much:

There were at least three men, with as many horses. One man was mounted, and his charger was—a buckskin horse!

"If that's my meat, where's the girl?" grimly muttered the Man from Denver as he made out this much. "If she isn't— A hanging-bee, by the Great Scott!"

Learning so much, the King-Pin Sport sprang into swift action, dropping down the rocks until at the point where his good horse was waiting his coming, then springing into the saddle and riding rapidly toward the spot where he had sighted those actors in a grim border drama.

He spurred around those rocks and scrubby trees just as the cowboy drew back and struck the buckskin gelding with his hat to send him off and leave his rider swinging by the neck at the end of the lasso!

But the horse only squatted to its haunches with a snort, checked by that swiftly charging shape, and as the cowboys caught at their guns in fierce alarm, the Man from Denver cheerily called out:

"Hello, gentlemen! What do you reckon you're trying to do, anyway?"

"Yankin' up a cussed hoss-thief, blame ye!" came the harsh reply.

"I never—as Heaven hears me I'm innocent!" cried Kane, hoarsely.

"Let's argue the case a bit, please, pardners!" coolly spoke Gayworthy.

CHAPTER IX.

"GO-EASY DAN," THE MOUNTAIN TRAMP.

WHILE speaking the Man from Denver had moved closer to the buckskin gelding and its helpless burden, but so naturally that neither of the cowboys suspected aught of his real purpose until too late.

With a swift motion Gayworthy flung off that degrading noose, at the same time lifting a ready revolver the muzzle of which seemed to cover both cowboys at one and the same time, its master speaking coolly:

"Call it a truce, gentlemen, until we can talk it all over in a quiet, peaceable manner; won't you?"

"Ef you're his mate in—"

"Which I certainly am not, without he can wholly clear his skirts of the ugly charge you bring against him, gentlemen," even more quickly cut in the King-Pin Sport. "But I always did hold out for trying before hanging, and so— Is it peace, or must it be war, my friends?"

"We ketched him a-straddle the very critter which—"

"I never stole him, though!" cried Kane, earnestly, plucking up new courage now that his neck seemed fairly out of the noose. "I've already told you how I came to— Hal!" as he for the first time seemed to recognize the new-comer. "Ask him! Ask him how I got the horse, and if the two tales don't match—"

"Which they shorely would ef you're mates," surlily growled Ike Dumphrey, chafing hotly at being so readily caught off guard.

"One thing at a time, please," easily said the Man from Denver, toying with his gun the while, yet hardly in the attitude of one who really expects to be called upon to use it in a business manner. "Holding the belief that about the very worst use you can put a man to is to hang him, I just chipped in on the off-chance of your having made a mistake. Now, taking another look, I reckon I was nearer right than I knew!"

"You saw me at the stage, sir? Now, do you remember the horse?"

The Man from Denver nodded assent, and briefly told how Kane had mounted the horse left by the fleeing road-agents, to go in chase of the general enemy.

"And to show you that I'm not less than half-white, oblige me by looking over these few lines, gentlemen," concluded Gayworthy, producing an open letter at the bottom of which showed the bold signature of General David Cook, chief of the Rocky Mountain Detective Association.

That letter strongly commended the bearer, Thomas Gayworthy; and as the two cowboys took in its full purport, their manner changed and they greeted the King-Pin Sport as a more than worthy member.

"That settles it, boss, fur's this man's consarned," declared Ike Dumphrey, as he began removing his lasso from the person of Kane. "It's one o' the critters Art. McCoy lost off the C. Bar Ranch, shore 'nough, but 'cordin' to your 'count, he never done the liftin'."

The Man from Denver lightly put aside the muttered thanks which came from the rescued man, then spoke with greater earnestness:

"I'm just from the Relay-station, looking for a young lady who has turned up missing, some time since dark, last night. You can't tell me anything about her, can you, gentlemen?"

Kane seemed wholly absorbed in rubbing his rope-chafed limbs, but the cowboys showed strong interest, asking many questions concerning the affair, which were answered or evaded by Ten-strike Tom as he thought best; but then, lacking aught more encouraging, Duke Vinson said:

"Nuther o' us ever see'd anything o' the like, boss, but mebbe he mought sarve ye better."

"Which 'he' is that, pardner?" asked Gayworthy, with a fleeting look toward Heber Kane.

"Not him, but a quar critter as goes by the name of Go-easy Dan. I ketch a glimp' o' him moseyin' 'long yen' way jest afore sundown, an' when he gits sech a streak on, they do say he jest keeps on the tramp fer night an' day, the same! An' ef ary pa'r o' two lookin' eyes kin see more'n them as Go-easy totes over his nose, then I'd like to know!"

"That's what!" curtly confirmed Dumphrey.

Ten-strike Tom put a few questions, all bearing upon this personage, the result of which was that he declared his intention of seeking his aid, if only to search for a possible trail.

"Which I don't reckon you'd be wastin' of yer time so mighty much, nuther boss," earnestly declared Vinson. "Go-easy hes eyes like a owl fer seein' in the dark, an' ef

he cain't tell ye nothin', then I don't know ary one as kin!"

"Ef he wants, that is," gravely inserted Ike Dumphrey, lowering his tones a trifle, with a sidelong look toward Heber Kane. "Go-easy ain't a plum' saint, boss! To whiddle'er down p'intedly, he hain't a durn bit better'n he ort to be; but I will say this much: he's the best an' shortest han' at a blind trail in seventeen States!"

"An' cranky—gee-thunder!" ejaculated Duke Vinson, with up-rolling eyes. "Ef ye ketch him in good humor, Dan's all right; but ef ary thing's come to rub his ha'r the wrong way—wake up snakes an' crawl out o' range!"

"That's so, boss. Odds is the p'izen critter'd pull his gun an' let blizzer 'thout stoppin' to say git!"

Ten-strike Tom listened to all this in grim silence, nodding to each speaker in turn, then parting his own lips to say:

"Sounds like a tough nut to crack, doesn't it? Well, I want Go-easy Dan's help, and what I want right badly I pretty generally contrive to get. And so—if you gentlemen will kindly show me where this fellow hangs out when he's at home, I'll answer for the rest."

"It's easy 'nough showin', boss, for his shack hain't so mighty fur off from this; but—Waal, you don't want to rush in too turrible brash onto Dan Flick—no, ye don't, now!"

"Thanks, pardner," with a short laugh. "I'm not lead-hungry, and so it may be better to work a little traverse on our worthy friend. You point out his den, and I'll engineer the rest of it."

While this was going on, Kane had put himself into pretty fair condition once more, and now, as the others showed signs of taking the road in good earnest, he hung back, like one who had no desire to share their company further.

Ten-strike Tom was swift to note this intention, and as quickly won a chance to let fall a warning sentence or two:

"Don't you try it on, pardner!" he muttered, barely loud enough for those ears to catch his full meaning. "If you should attempt to jump the game so soon, they'd feel sure you're in the wrong, and might drop you before I could interfere. And if you were to desert a white woman just when she may be needing assistance the worst, I'm not so sure I wouldn't take a snap-shot at your bigness my own self!"

There was still sterner warning in those glittering eyes, and with an uneasy shuffle the big fellow gave way, mumbling something about his willingness, but that his wound troubled him sorely.

The little party once more got under way, with Heber Kane once more riding the buckskin gelding, possession of which had brought him so perilously near to death's portals.

He maintained silence save when directly addressed, which was very seldom, for neither one of the cowboys seemed to have fallen in love with him, even though they had given over all idea of making him "pull hemp" as a horse-thief.

Ten-strike Tom had ample food for thought, and what few remarks he did make bore almost entirely upon the habits or personality of the man in quest of whom they were then bound.

Enough was said to prove "Go-easy" Dan Flick a typical mountain tramp who led a solitary life from choice, who seemed perfectly independent in that life, caring for man nor devil, going his own way by day or by night without the slightest regard for what others might think or wish.

As the cowboys had declared, that mountain shack was located at no very great distance from the spot so nearly made memorable by a hanging scrape, and as Ten-strike Tom was warned that they were drawing very near the place, he called a halt to arrange their further movements.

"It is just possible that this Flick may have picked the young lady up while astray, last night," he said, gravely. "If so, we want to learn as much without having to take his word for it, and in order to make all sure—listen!"

"You fellows will approach in front, to hold Flick in parley, while I circle around to the rear of his shack. Just hold him level

until I chip in, and then let the mule do his kicking!"

So much the Man from Denver uttered openly, after which he quietly let fall a hint that the cowboys had best keep a wary eye on Heber Kane, bidding them guard against his slipping away during their advance.

Dumphrey gave a nod of satisfaction, grimly adding:

"We'll be thar when you chip, pardner; all three of us, too! Ef ary one o' us gits skeered into makin' a sneak, t'others ll blow a hole through him big 'nough fer a dog to jump through. Eh, Duke?"

"You jest bet your ole socks, Dumph!"

Ten-strike Tom chuckled as he saw Kane shiver at those grim words; then he left his horse with the others and hurried off with noiseless speed.

The cowboys, after saying enough to let Heber know they fully counted on his aid and close company, likewise moved toward that as yet hidden shanty, leaving their animals tied below.

Rounding a pile of rugged rocks, the cowboys came into full view of the little cabin, stopping short as they caught sight of a man squatting in front of the cabin, smoking.

"It's Go-easy Dan!" muttered Ike, who was leading the way, revolver in hand; then calling aloud: "Hello, thar!"

"Go easy, lads!" came from the smoker, a roughly-clad man of probably three-score years, judging from his wrinkled, leathery skin and straggling gray hair and beard. "Go easy, or mebbe you'll ketch it goin' pretty durn hard, instead!"

"That's all right, pardner," hastily spoke up Dumphrey. "We're friends, an' we want to come in ontel—"

The mountain tramp puffed a cloud of blue smoke their way, moving again to grip with right hand the rusty rifle which rested against the cabin, then bluntly retorting:

"Go easy, all! I don't like yer git-up fer a cent, an' ye jest cain't come in—so thar!"

"Is that so?" and the warm color leaped into the cowboy's cheeks as he took a step forward. "An', suppose we say we'll come in ary how: what're you gwine to do 'bout it?"

"Go easy, you!" cried the mountain tramp, shrilly, letting his blackened pipe drop from his lantern jaws, springing to his feet with back to wall and rifle flying to his shoulder. "Go easy, all! I'm Dan Flick, an' I kin shoot to a fly-speck at sixty rod! When I say stay out, the Ole Boy himself cain't come in!"

"But—don't shoot, you old fool, you!" spluttered Dumphrey, ducking his head as those double sights bore full upon his brain.

"Go easy, fer the last callin'! I say you're too durn ugly fer to come in when I say stop out! An' so—git! Rack out, dug-gun yel Git! or I'll blow a tunnel clean through ye, shore's my name's—"

"Go easy, Daniel!" cried a clear voice from the rear, and as the heavy wooden shutter swung open, a strong pair of hands shot forth to grip man and gun: but not quick enough to check a shot!

CHAPTER X.

ILL TIDINGS OF THE MISSING ONE.

As Jay Whittaker uttered those earnest words, his strong arms closed about the form of his sweetheart, for it seemed as though Alda would fall, so bitterly fell that blow.

For a brief space little that was coherent enough to find record here passed between the lovers, but then the maiden grew calmer under his tender ministrations, and begged to know the very worst.

First inducing her to sit down upon one of the rude self-made stools which Go-easy Dan Flick had provided in his leisure hours, Jay Whittaker knelt at her side, one hand holding both of hers, his other arm around her waist, lending support in a physical as well as moral sense.

"I can't really believe there's any 'worst' to it, Alda," was his beginning, "although it's been a mighty hard matter to break to you, happening as it has, just when—and you

so confidently expected Philo to be the first one to give you that glad greeting, too!"

"Then brother isn't— Oh, Jay!" her head sinking upon his shoulder and her hot tears dampening his sleeve.

"I honestly believe Philo is as well in body as I am this blessed moment!" slowly, distinctly asserted the young man.

"Then why— Go on, please, dear," lifting her head and forcing a faint smile. "I can bear it all, now. 'Twas the awful dread that— It seemed as though I could see his poor, dear face looking up at me from a river of— Ugh!"

"That's because you're all out of sorts, darling," soothingly declared her lover. "No wonder, after meeting with such an adventure! Why, pet, when I stop to think it all over—"

"Never mind me: tell me about brother Philo!"

Alda spoke with a touch of irritation very unusual with her, particularly toward this loved one; but Jay Whittaker could make allowance for the poor girl, knowing how severely she must be suffering from suspense.

He himself was feeling far from at ease, and a vast deal less confident that all was well with Philo Copeland, Alda's brother, than he tried to make her believe.

Of course he knew that Alda would not be content with less than the whole truth, so far as that lay within his knowledge, but he knew, too, that she ought to be better prepared for receiving that truth.

It was this care, then, fully as much as aught else, which led him to put the matter into the form of a narrative, speaking rapidly, like one who tries to leave no opening for too pointed questions.

"Of course you haven't forgotten the understanding we had, dearest, how you were to contrive a halt at this station, even though you had to pretend severe illness to overcome Mr. Copeland's objections?"

"I know. How could I forget? But— Philo?" murmured the maiden.

"I'm just coming to that part, pet," drawing her sunny-haired head closer against his shoulder, thus hiding his own face from her eyes lest she read in them what his tongue was trying to gloss over.

"We got here a little ahead of the schedule, to guard against accidents, and Philo made friends with the odd old fellow who owns this rude shanty. Go-easy Dan, he is better known, I believe."

"And Philo—oh, Jay! if you only knew how anxious I am!"

"Don't I know, darling? I'd give a hand if I could only drive that anxiety away—if I could put Philo right in my place this minute!"

"If both were only here, rather!"

A lovely kiss rewarded that kind amendment, then Whittaker resumed the story he found so difficult in the telling.

"Well, dearest, we settled down here, far enough away from the station to keep your uncle from suspecting aught too soon, yet near enough for us to keep our appointment made with you; don't you see, pet?"

"But—I was delayed for hours, and you—how much later were you, Jay? And— Philo?"

"Be sure I had good reasons for being late, Alda," came the quick yet grave response. "And this is how it chanced, dear:

"Philo and I thought we might at least kill time by taking a little jaunt over toward the stage route, yesterday. Not that we meant to show ourselves, prematurely; you had given us too grave a warning against any such imprudence, dear! But—well, we reckoned maybe we might catch at least a distant glimpse of the stage as it crossed the range.

"We rode, of course, as the point we had in view was pretty nearly twenty miles off, but we made fair time through the roughest part of the hills, and counted sure on getting our reward.

"We slipped up on that, though. Maybe we were a bit out in our calculations, or possibly, our bearings were wrong, since we were both new to the country round about. And so— Now I'm coming to it, darling!"

Alda had shifted uneasily or impatiently,

but at his repeated assurance she quieted down to listen further.

"We'd a wide view from the point to which we had climbed, and although we couldn't see anything of the stage road itself, still we felt fairly certain that we ought to at least glimpse the coach, or note its progress by the dust, if nothing better.

But after waiting until we knew the stage must have passed our line of sight, provided it was keeping anything like schedule time, we gave it over as a bad job, and went back to where we'd left our horses.

"I was looking what I surely felt: mighty glum over our lack of success, but Philo was in a gay, jolly humor, chaffing me most unmercifully as we once more took horse.

"He said I must be mighty far gone if I couldn't wait a few hours longer; and then we fell to talking over how we would meet you, dear, when you slipped away from your uncle; how we would take you with us to this very cabin, here to rest and rally for a gipsy-like trip through the mountains and over the plains to our future home—your home and mine, my darling!"

Very loving these strong arms wound about that trim shape, and ardent were the kisses which Jay Whittaker pressed upon those tremulous lips; lips which, a moment later faintly murmured her brother's name!

The lover frowned at this, but only for a single breath. He loved Philo only less than he did Alda, and by his own anxiety he could pretty fairly gauge that which the sister must be feeling.

"Yes, and Philo's home as well!" he murmured, willfully misconstruing her meaning, then quickly adding: "And talking thus we rode carelessly onward without care or trouble until we came to the foot of a big hill—almost mountain."

"And then? What happened to him, dear?"

"Nothing—just then, pet. But a mule deer jumped up from a bit of a draw right ahead of us, and with a wild whoop Philo opened fire on it with his revolver, hitting the animal more than once before it disappeared among a patch of bushes above us.

"Philo sprung from his saddle and ran up to where the deer had passed, giving a whoop as he found a bunch of hair which his lead had cut off, then calling out that he had found blood—plenty of it, too!"

"I joined him, of course, and we saw that the deer must have been hard hit, for the bushes were sprinkled with fresh blood; but I laughed at the lad when he vowed that he would and must have his meat!"

"He said he wanted fresh venison for you, when you joined us, and that you'd turn up your dainty little nose at the salt pork and hard-tack Go-easy Dan kept on hand. I pointed out that it was getting well along in the afternoon, and we were still a goodly distance from the rendezvous, but all I could say was of no avail.

"Philo was determined to get his deer, and after following the trail far enough to make it fairly clear that the animal had struck in a nearly direct line across the ridge, Philo bade me take horse and circle around to the right, while he cut off to the left.

"By doing this, he said, one or the other of us would be pretty certain to hit off the trail in case the deer should attempt to double, while if it kept straight on, we'd find either body or spoor on the further side of the hill."

"And then?" almost breathlessly asked the sister, looking up with eyes that showed the intensest anxiety, her fair face pale as that of a corpse, just then. "You parted company? Oh, Jay, why did you—why did you let his hot blood carry away your cooler judgment?"

"How could I even guess that it would end so, Alda?" huskily asked her lover, himself betraying powerful agitation, now. "It seemed safe enough—it was safe enough, surely! And yet—that was the very latest glimpse I've had of your brother, Alda! We parted then, and when I reached the other side of the hill—Philo never came!"

Alda bowed her head, sobbing convulsively, for she seemed to read the very worst tidings in that face, in those unsteady tones. And Jay Whittaker seemed scarcely able to resume his recital, just then.

Perhaps it was well that, a few seconds

later, there came a sharp whistle from outside, followed by the call:

"Hellow, thar! That's your light, young feller?"

"It's Go-easy Dan," hastily explained Whittaker, as the maiden gave a sudden start at that unexpected interruption. "I'll answer him, and—All right, Flick! I'm here ahead of you, man!"

While speaking, the young man sprung to the door and flung it open, barring the passage long enough to let fall a whispered warning:

"Caution, Dan! His sister's here, and—don't shock her, too badly!"

"Go easy—Go easy!" drawled the newcomer as he paused upon the threshold to stare half-dazedly at the fair vision which so suddenly confronted him; for Alda Copeland had sprung to her feet and was moving forward, eager to learn if news had come of her missing brother.

"You have brought him—my dear brother is with you, sir?" she said, in far from steady tones, half-resisting the hand which Jay Whittaker flung out to support her unsteady steps. "Don't, please! I want my brother! He is—oh, sir, tell me he isn't—is well?"

"Go easy—go easy—ye got to go easy, Dan!" muttered the mountain tramp as that little hand touched his arm; but then he rallied, and with a degree of gentleness which was hardly to be expected in one of his make-up, he brought the maiden back to her place on the stool, speaking in soothing tones:

"It's all right, purty ma'am, an' ye want to go easy—go easy!"

"And Philo? He is my brother—the only relative I have left to care for me, sir!" brokenly said the maiden, gazing appealingly into those keen gray eyes above her.

"Waal, waal, I want to know! Brother, hey? An' him only—Go easy, Dan! An' him hevin' sech a monstrous sweet s'prise-party waitin' of his comin' like this! An' him—ef he was to jest know, wouldn't he hurry up his cakes, though?"

From back of the maiden Jay Whittaker was making signs of caution at a wonderful rate, but the mountain tramp had caught the cue, and the young man drew a sigh of relief as he listened further.

"And he is—is coming here, sir?" asked Alda, her face brightening up as hope was renewed in her heart.

"Comin', is it? Be course he's comin', an'—go easy, Dan! Wouldn't wonder ef he was to git hyar afore grub's ready! An' so—mebbe you hain't too turrible proud an' lofty-minded fer to len' us a helpin' hand in gittin' it ready, boss?" with a significant nod toward Whittaker, who was swift to take a hint, and followed Flick out of doors.

"Go easy, you! An' him—waal, he's in turrible big tuck ef he hain't pulled hemp fer hoss-stealin', afore this!" whispered Go-easy Dan the moment they had passed out of the maiden's sight.

CHAPTER XI.

TELLING A PIOUS LIE.

JAY WHITTAKER caught his breath sharply at that whispered sentence which seemed to even more than confirm the worst fears with which the lovers had been assailed.

Still, he dared not ask for plainer speech just then, for he caught the faint tap-tapping of Alda's shoes upon the puncheon floor, and turned around just in time to meet her at the threshold.

"You're not afraid to wait here alone for a few moments, are you?" he said, uttering the first words that offered themselves. "We'll rustle up something to eat, shortly, and—"

Alda put both hands upon his shoulders, gazing steadily into his face like one seeking there the truth which was denied her ears.

"You are dealing fairly with me, Jay?" she asked, her tones growing firmer as she forced her courage to the front once more.

"Philo is not dead?"

"Heaven forbid!"

"Go easy, ma'am!" chipped in the mountain tramp, coming to the rescue of his boarder. "Wharfo' should the lad go dead? Whoof! Ef I was as full an' runnin' over with life as he be—go easy, thar!"

"Why isn't brother here to greet me, then? Why do you both look and act so

strangely whenever I ask about Philo?" persisted the maiden.

"Go easy—go easy!" spluttered the veteran, his gaunt features working spasmodically, his long arms flourishing like flails as he added: "I cain't—hain't used to wimmin-critters! You tell, boss! Whoof! I'm huntin' mo' breathin' stuff, I be!"

The mountain tramp turned and fled as from some ferocious adversary, leaving Jay Whittaker to clear away the troubled clouds as best he might.

There was only one course to be followed now, and gently forcing the frightened girl back to her former position, the young man quickly finished the story which had been cut short by the return of Go-easy Dan Flick.

He spoke of vain waiting and fruitless searching for the missing young man, then of his hurrying back to that mountain shack in quest of its owner, whose far greater experience in wild life might bring about better results.

He explained how they had hurried back to the hill where Philo Copeland had disappeared so strangely, and told of their vain search for the young man, or for aught which might at least explain his vanishment.

"I hunted there until after dark, dearest, and would have been there yet, only for our pledge to meet you near the station. As it was, you know how late I was in finding you—how narrowly I missed losing you altogether!"

"And he—this man?" asked the maiden, lifting her drooping head to gaze into her lover's face as it showed by the unsteady candle-light. "Tell me the whole truth, Jay; he has brought evil tidings of poor Philo? What is it?—tell me all, I beg of you, dear!"

Jay Whittaker caught at the words a bit, but then bravely said:

"You heard all he said, Alda, and I can hardly think he would lie about so serious a matter. Still, I'll go fetch him here; or maybe I'd learn more by questioning him apart. He seems so ill at ease before a lady, don't you think?"

Alda rose up to gaze steadily into his eyes, then slowly spoke:

"You will tell me all, Jay? You will not deceive me, even for what you may think my own good?"

"I'll tell you everything I learn from Flick, darling," quickly declared her lover, bending until his lips touched hers, then adding: "And now, let me go and find the old codger, Alda. He'll never come back until I've set his mind a bit more at rest."

Slowly, reluctantly, like one who wishes to trust yet who is assailed by ugly doubts, the maiden drew back from her lover, and then Whittaker hastily beat a retreat.

He had no difficulty in finding Flick, for that worthy joined him within the first half-dozen rods, betraying an unusual degree of interest in both face and tones as he huskily muttered:

"Go easy, pardner—go easy! An' you hed to rack out, too, did ye? An' the leddy? She hain't got over—"

"What did you discover, Flick?" interrupted Whittaker, gripping an arm and half-forcing the old fellow beyond eye-shot of the cabin. "You found—just what?"

"That a hunk ole hell hes bu'sted loose, boss!" came the energetic whisper. "You hedn't much more'n got well out o' sight an' hearin' afore I hit off the trail, an' right thar—ef it isn't a matter o' hoss an' hemp, boss, then I'm a howler from Liarville!"

"What? Surely not—he wasn't—lynched?" hoarsely demanded Jay Whittaker, turning very pale the while.

"Go easy—go easy, lad!" exploded the mountain tramp as he first flinched from that fierce hand-grip, then freed his arm with a sudden twist and jerk. "Naw! You're wuss'n the gal fer jumpin' to 'clusions, you be, an' that's useless!"

Jay Whittaker gave a long breath of relief, then spoke more quietly:

"You frightened me, man, after what happened about the nags. Now, say just what you did find out, please, for the lady is waiting, and I've got to satisfy her fears, one way or the other."

"Easy—go easy, boss! I found the trail; a mighty mixed-up one she was, too, fcy

readin' in the glimmer! But old Dan kin play owl with the best of 'em, an' so—the youngster run right chuck up ag'inst a wheen o' fellers from the McCoy Ranch, no less!"

"How could you tell that?"

"Too dead easy, boss! What've I got these two lookin' eyes fer? An' when a body meets up with that huff-prent, then a body eain't holp but know that Art McCoy hes bin right thar!"

"What print? Speak plainer, can't you, man alive?"

"The prent left by McCoy's saddle-stallion, Little-foot," came the instant response. "Ary man on all this wide range knows that hoss. He's got one huff heap sight lighter'n the others, an' thar hain't never a other man backed Little-foot 'cept big Art McCoy him own self!"

Now thoroughly warmed up to his task, Go-easy Dan volubly explained further about the noted saddle-stallion and its owner, then went on to tell how he had found the trail, following it with the words:

"Ef thar'd 'a' bin sun fer light 'stead o' stars, 'twouldn't 'a' tuck me nigh so long, but thar was the sign, an' I was thar to spell 'em all out 'cordin' to law an' gospel. Which I done did, too! An' so—the way of it was jest like this, boss!"

"The younker run chuck up 'g'inst Big Art McCoy an' a passel o' the C. Bar cowboys. Thar was sign of a sort o' squamble, like, but no red paint spilled, nur yit nary a dead meat."

"Thank Heaven for so much!" huskily ejaculated Whittaker, who had begun to expect far worse tidings.

"No, they wasn't no killin' done, thar-away, 'tany rate," cheerfully asserted the mountain tramp, "an' when the passel done rid away from whar I found thar tracks, the younker went 'long, ridin' on his own hoss, too!"

"But you said—"

"Go easy—go easy, lad! Why wouldn't I done said so, after the way you fellers was bounced 'bout them same hoss critters? Ef one fool cowboy tuck your rocks to pay fer a stole critter, is that ary sign Big Art McCoy would play the same game? An' so—that 'ar trail headed co-strut fer the C. Bar Ranch, an' it's thar you've got to look fer your pardner—ef he hain't cold meat afore this—swingin' at the wrong eend of a trail-rope—wuss luck him!"

Feeling that he had learned the worst at last, Jay Whittaker drew a little apart from the mountain tramp, bowing his head in thought, remaining thus for a few minutes before he could fairly decide upon his proper course to pursue.

Having tried in vain to see a way out of the tangle without letting Alda learn at least a portion of the truth, Whittaker turned once more toward Dan Flick, briefly explaining the presence there of Miss Copeland, but without exposing her actual reasons for keeping such an oddly-arranged rendezvous, he added, hurriedly:

"I'm going over to McCoy's Ranch to clear her brother, Flick, and she mustn't learn just what danger threatens him—yet! And—bear this in mind, old friend, will you?"

"Which?"

"Don't let anybody from the station learn of her presence here, even if you have to stand them off at the muzzle of your guns, Dan! I'll explain it all later on, but—you'll do it? You'll keep her safely for us, old fellow?"

"Easy—go easy! Why wouldn't I, then, ef so be she wants it to be that-a-way?" spluttered the mountain tramp.

Thus given the assurance he wanted, and fearing to delay longer, Jay Whittaker returned to the cabin, and there told Alda a portion of the truth; saying that Philo had purchased his horse of one who had proved to be a knave, if not an actual horse-thief.

"That's what's detainin' Philo, dear, but it'll all turn out right in the end, and I'll have him here to laugh with his sister over the boggle, by breakfast time, sure!"

"There is no—no actual danger, then?" faltered Alda.

"Nothing worse than annoyance and, maybe, the loss of a few dollars, my dear," came the cheery assurance, Whittaker lying

piously, since he held it was for her own good to gloss over the truth. "Our good host, here, found the trail, and says it leads across to the McCoy Ranch. I'm going over there, at once, and by telling just how we happened to come into possession of the nag, and offering to give it back, everything will be cleared up, and it'll only make another laughing-point on our romantic little jaunt—don't you see, darling?"

The young man told his lie with so much plausibility that Alda was convinced of its truth, all the more easily that her own wishes led in that direction.

Then, that danger-point rounded, Whittaker assured the maiden she could place full reliance on Dan Flick, under whose protecting wing she would be perfectly safe until their return; all of which was volubly confirmed by the host in person, who had returned to his shack, once more his ordinary self.

Having smoothed matters over after this fashion, Jay Whittaker took a quiet leave of his sweetheart, deftly stealing a kiss when Go-easy Dan had turned his back, but at the same instant repaying the theft in kind.

Leaving the shanty, followed by Flick, Whittaker looked after his horse, which was still fit for the road, although it doubtless would have appreciated a longer rest and a better bait.

"An' you're shorely gwine to ride up thar to the C. Bar, boss?" asked the old man, vigorously working his lantern jaws on a chew of plug tobacco.

"Unless I run up against a snag by the way—I surely am!" came the quick reply, as the young man swung himself into the saddle. "You'll not forget the warning I gave, about the lady, friend?"

"Go easy, boss! Don't you worry 'bout that. But—I say, boss!"

"Well, what is it, Flick?"

"Waal, boss, hyar's tryin' fer to hope Big Art McCoy won't stretch your neck fer ridin' of the wrong hoss, too!"

CHAPTER XII.

GO-EASY DAN, THE WATCH-DOG.

WITH a certain end in view, Ten-strike Tom was hardly one to waste time in winning his goal, and having fairly located that rude cabin in the hills, he picked his way swiftly among the thick-lying rocks, laying a course which would enable him to gain the rear of the shack.

There proved to be naught to hinder him in reaching the desired station, and he was already at the cabin when he caught the first sounds from the front, denoting the coming of the cowboys.

"Good!" the Man from Denver muttered, with grim satisfaction, as he heard Go-easy Dan give his first challenge. "The old fellow's on guard outside, and that's heap sight better than having to storm his castle, even from the rear! Now—for the next thing!"

There was a narrow door of heavy slabs at the rear end of the rude shanty, and Ten-strike Tom gave another grim nod as he felt the inside bar lift in answer to his steady tug at the rawhide latch-string.

Keeping well to one side while the barrier swung open, lest there might be another near enough to resent such an intrusion with a shot, the Man from Denver drew his own gun by way of further precaution, then sprung with catlike activity in through the opening.

Catlike, too, his feet gave forth no echo to call disagreeable attention his way, and flashing a keen glance around him, taking in every detail with photographic accuracy, the King-Pin Sport found himself fairly master of the situation.

Through a narrow door to his left, he caught a glimpse of a bed, near the end of which he noted a trimly-booted foot which looked strangely out of place amid such surroundings, but the sight of which brought a glad smile to that strongly handsome visage.

"Another ten-strike, as I'm a mascot!" the Man from Denver muttered barely above his breath; for right well he knew that trim foot could only belong to Alda Copeland, over whose mysterious vanishment he had spent so much vain conjecture.

Still, powerful as his curiosity naturally was, Gayworthy could not give time to satis-

fying it just then, for Go-easy Dan was just hurling his grim warning into the teeth of the cowboys, and wasting even a moment might mean the loss of a human life.

Springing across the room with scarcely a sound that could betray his movements to a listening ear, Ten-strike Tom peered through a tiny crack, just long enough to take in the whole situation; then he acted with prompt decision.

Swinging open the heavy shutter which masked the window, he caught both man and gun, left arm curving around the mountain tramp's neck to hold him helpless, the other hand jerking the rusty rifle upward and to one side.

The weapon exploded, since his finger was already touching the trigger, but the bullet sped harmlessly through the air, and again the King-Pin Sport made his ringing notes heard by all:

"Steady, all! No more foolishness, now! This way, mates, but put up your guns and show the flag of truce!"

With a deft wrench of his muscular hand, Gayworthy twisted the rifle out of Flick's grip, weakened as that was by surprise and that suffocating pressure upon his throat.

The cowboys rushed forward to complete the victory, and only for the stern warning flung at them by the Man from Denver, Go-easy Dan might have met with rather rough treatment.

As it was, his pistols were taken away from him, together with his ugly-looking butcher-knife, then Gayworthy slackened his grip, to say:

"We're friends, pardner, although you mayn't think just that way, at first. Now—go easy, please!"

He released the mountain tramp entirely at that, turning swiftly as he heard a low, surprised exclamation.

"You, sir?"

"As you perceive, Miss Copeland!" answered the King-Pin Sport, lifting his hat with a smiling bow as he faced the young lady who now stood in the open doorway between the two rooms.

Alda shrunk back, flushing warmly, her face betraying something of the powerful embarrassment she could not help feeling, just then; but if he saw, Ten-strike Tom made no comment, simply adding:

"Sorry if I cut your slumber short, Miss Copeland, but I really had to—Excuse me a moment, please? Our eccentric host, out yonder, seems to be on the point of boiling over, and I really must keep the peace!"

Turning away as he spoke, the Man from Denver opened the door which Go-easy Dan had defended until surprised by an attack from the rear, and stepping forth, he gripped that bony right hand, shaking it cordially.

"We're the solidest friends an honest man like you could ever meet up with, Daniel!" he declared with a heartiness to equal that grip. "And to prove it—you've got a lady in yonder who can go our bail!"

"Easy—go easy, dug-gun ye fer—what p'izen sort o' critters be ye, aryhaw?" spluttered the discomfited watch-dog, jerking his hand free and backing away, defiantly glaring at face after face. "Ef I on'y jest hed my guns—whoof! I kin shoot to a fly-speck at sixty rod! I kin ride the buckinest cayuse that ever was foaldded! I kin—whoof! Le' me git a woolly start an' I'll show ye—"

He made a savage plunge straight for head and throat of the smiling Sport, striking with fist at one, clutching with bony fingers for the other; but neither member made perfect connection.

With a duck and a dodge the Man from Denver cheated both, coming up inside the old man's guard, grasping Flick around his middle, twisting him from his footing, then laying the amazed fellow on the broad of his back, standing easily astride his body with folded arms and laughing lips.

"Go easy—go—waa, now I will ber-durned!" fairly exploded the astonished tramp of the hills, too greatly taken aback to do more than lie as placed, staring up at his conqueror, half-awed.

Just then Alda Copeland came hastily through the doorway, making an appealing gesture as she cried out, agitatedly:

"Don't—please don't harm him, gentle men! He's a—he is my friend, and I wouldn't—let him arise, Mr. Gayworthy!"

"As your friend, Miss Copeland, the gentleman is sacred to us. Still you can hardly blame us for doubting—"

Meanwhile Go-easy Dan had improved that brief interference by hastily scrambling to his feet, giving his muffled plumage a vigorous shake before stepping in between those two.

"Go easy, you!" he growlingly spoke, frowning blackly into the face of the Man from Denver. "An' who mought you be, Mister Man with the pile o' lip?"

"My friends call me Thomas Gayworthy," almost meekly answered the King-Pin Sport, while a half snicker came from the cowboys as they stood looking on.

"Whar ye come from, critter?"

"Denver, last, your Honor."

"What fetched ye hyar, anyway?"

"This lady, who—"

"Easy—go easy, critter!" sharply cried the human watch-dog, rudely striking aside the hand which Gayworthy easily waved toward Alda. "Tetch not, or I'll tetch ye—too turrible hard!"

"Beg your pardon, sir, but I only meant to—" meekly began Ten-strike Tom, only to have his apologetic speech rudely cut short.

"Go easy, I tell ye, critter! Now—from Denver, ye say?"

"Yes, sir. In fact, I'm sometimes called the Man from Denver," quietly answered the sport, still without cracking a smile or betraying aught of impatience at that rude inquisition.

Go-easy Dan slowly swept his gaze over the adventurer, from face to feet, then reversing the process before he spoke again. Then he bluntly exploded:

"Waal, then, ef ye hain't a plum' fool, critter, ye'd better pull out o' this an' git back to Denver, quick's the law'll let ye—or quicker!"

"Why should I do that, pray, sir?"

"Go easy, thar! Hain't I tryin' fer to tell ye jest that, then? So—this yer' leddy is putt under my p'tection, d'ye mind? An' when I say so much, hain't it tellin' of ye to skin out o' this afore ye come to heap sight wuss?"

Then, seemingly wearying of such folly, Ten-strike Tom sternly flung forth an arm and brushed the surprised tramp aside with hardly a perceptible effort, at the same time turning to the maiden to gravely say:

"I most sincerely beg your pardon, Miss Copeland, for making you an unwilling witness to such nonsense, but you denied me the right to answer a fool according to his folly, and—"

"Stiddy, Dan'll!" came in stern warning from Ike Humphrey, who saw the human watch-dog crouching as though to leap upon this bold stranger. "Stiddy, thar, or I'll lift yer ruff, Flick!"

"Ef you say fer me to bounce him!" grimly spoke up the mountain vagabond, after flashing a vicious look toward the cowboy. "Shell I?"

"Wait—no! I hardly think Mr. Gayworthy would—"

Alda broke off, sorely embarrassed as those keen black eyes rested upon her flushing face.

She was beginning to see how impossible it would be for her to fairly or fully explain away her strange flight from the station, particularly now that she had neither brother nor lover to assist in that explanation.

The King Pin Sport read something of this embarrassment in her fair face, although of course he could not grasp the right clue to it all, and consequently was able to make only the wildest of guesses at the truth.

Still, he had not taken so much trouble and come so far to perform what he deemed a duty, to turn back without at least making an effort to complete his self imposed task; and in grave tones he spoke again:

"Did you know that your uncle, Mr. Copeland, was taken seriously ill in the night, last past, Miss Copeland?"

"Uncle Cephas—ill?" exclaimed Alda, with a start, her face losing much of its warm color at that question.

"Yes. The station keeper woke me up a little after midnight, saying that the old gentleman was in a mighty bad way, while he—"

"I never— I couldn't—" stammered the maiden, confusedly.

"I went in response to that summons, Miss Copeland, and regret to say that I found your relative really ill; and he kept calling for you, his niece, his little girl! And when I looked for you—"

Alda was shrinking away from those grave sentences, as though each one covered a smarting stroke. Evidently Go-easy Dan had some such fancy, for he paid no further attention to the cowboys, moving menacingly toward the Man from Denver as he gratingly cried out:

"Ye said ye was from Denver last, dug-gun ye! An' now—be ye actilly come hyar from the station, critter?"

"Yes, but—"

"Go easy, critter! Ye lied to me, then? An' now—you git! I done swore nobody couldn't come hyar from the station, an'—git, dug-gun ye!"

With a savage, snarling cry the human watch-dog leaped upon Ten-strike Tom, just as shots and angry cries broke forth from the brace of cowboys, only a short distance away!

CHAPTER XIII.

FRESH TROUBLE FOR HEBER KANE.

NOTHING short of compulsion would have attached Heber Kane to that little squad, once his neck had been freed from the hangman's noose, and his prospects certainly had not grown any brighter since drawing up in front of that mountain shack.

With a modesty which may well be appreciated, he had kept himself as much in the background as possible, even before Miss Copeland made her appearance, but after that took place, his one and ardent desire was to seek other quarters at the earliest practicable moment.

Little by little he began edging away from the cabin and closer and closer to the shrub-studded rocks which served to close the view in that direction, and then, when Go-easy Dan fairly came to the front in his capacity as watch dog, the big fellow fancied his time had come at last, and as noiselessly as possible made his break, heading for the horses which had been left behind those rocks by the advancing party.

But in spite of the interest with which they were both listening and watching that half-whimsical dispute, the cowboys had not entirely forgotten the warning words let fall by the Man from Denver, and as Heber Kane made his dash for liberty, they made a dash for him.

Mingling with their shouts of fierce warning came the spiteful crack-crack of their guns, and both fugitive and bullets sped past that rocky point in close company.

"Knock a huff out from under him, Duke!" yelled Ike Humphrey as he split that little curling cloud of smoke in hot pursuit. "Brand the maverick, ef ye hev to eat cl'ar through both hides!"

The assault which Go-easy Dan made upon the Man from Denver was vicious enough to give any ordinary person all he wanted to do to guard his own life, but as Gayworthy heard that alarm and noted its cause, something very like an oath burst from his lips, and then he closed with the mountain tramp, using both arms and legs as only a skilled wrestler can.

A brief grapple where the antagonists stood breast to breast, then Go-easy Dan lost his footing after some marvelous manner, gasping forth his angry amazement as he went spinning through the air to drop in a tangled heap a good half-dozen paces away!

Without wasting so much as a glance that way, Ten-strike Tom sprang off in the direction taken by fugitive and pursuers, rounding that point of rocks just in time to see the cowboys fairly piling themselves on top of Heber Kane.

"Steady, lads!" was his shout of warning, as Gayworthy hurried to the spot. "Pin him fast, but don't hurt him more than you have to!"

His own powerful hands were ready to make that capture sure, but his aid was not needed. Groaning faintly, like one seriously hurt if not entirely disabled, the big fellow made no resistance to the bonds which were so swiftly applied by the cowboys.

When the dust had settled, and the

worthy an opportunity to examine the prisoner, however, it was discovered that no serious injury had come to him, neither of those hastily discharged shots breaking skin, that easy capture being wholly due to a trip and heavy fall sustained by the fugitive.

Heber Kane smothered a groan as he recognized the one who was bending over him, and then he huskily panted:

"Don't let 'em— I never— She's mistaken in the man, I say!"

There was quite enough in this broken plea to strengthen if not wholly confirm the suspicions which the Man from Denver had already entertained, and more firmly than ever did Ten-strike Tom resolve not to lose sight of this fellow until every point was cleared up.

"What made you run away, if you'd done nothing wrong?" he coldly demanded, at the same time lifting the hampered fellow upon his feet.

"Don't— I never—"

"Jest look at the face o' him, boss!" cut in Ike Humphrey, with pointing finger and grim grin. "Don't the werry mug o' him spell out boss-thief in letters bigger'n a yearlin' pelt? Caint ye jest see that he's born fer the rope, an'— Ugh! Makes me sick, the bar' lookin'!"

Ordinarily such an accusation would have caused the greatest fear, but now Heber Kane actually seemed relieved that such was the sole charge put in, for he ceased trembling so violently, and his tones were stronger as he put in a hurried denial.

"I never stole a horse, and I'll prove my innocence if you'll only give me half a show! Take me to the C. Bar Ranch, then! Put me face to face with my accusers, and—"

"Steady, pardner!" coldly cut in the Man from Denver, as his strong fingers closed more tightly upon that arm, to face the prisoner about, up that rocky slope. "Since you're so set that way, why not? Will you walk decently, or shall I give you the spur?"

The big fellow flinched and would have hung back with half a show; but his arms were bound behind him, and he knew how helpless he was in such hands.

Nodding for the cowboys to bear them company, Ten-strike Tom forced Heber Kane up the slope and around the bend into full view of the little cabin home, giving a short, impatient ejaculation as he saw that both Alda Copeland and Dan Flick had passed from sight.

He was not kept long in suspense as to the whereabouts of the mountain vagabond, at least, for the harsh warning rung forth almost as soon as he came into sight:

"Easy, go easy, thar! Rack out o' that, dug-gun ye, or I'll blow ye cl'ar to kingdom come an' never git back-ag'in!"

"Steady, you fool!" angrily shouted the Man from Denver as he swung Heber Kane to the front, holding the big fellow there as a sort of shield against that threatened shot.

A square of chinking had come away from between two of the logs close to the heavily-shuttered window, and now the muzzle of that rusty rifle came through the loophole, menacing the party without.

"Go easy, but go, ye p'izen critters!" again commanded Flick. "Ye done foolish me once, but ye cain't foolish the old man twice—no ye cain't, now! An' so I say it hard: rack out o' this in a holy hurry, the passel o' ye all, or I'll fill ye so dug-gun full o' lead they'll file a mineral claim onto ye—I will so!"

"Go easy yourself, Dan Flick!" sternly replied the Man from Denver, holding his ground and holding his living shield as well. "Flag of truce, I'm offering, and if you don't—"

"Flag o' nothin'! I'm a-tellin' of ye jest so: git! You're crowdin' on my ground, an' I'll turn it into a bone-yard ef ye don't rack out o' thar in less'n a holy hurry, now! Git—ye want to git?"

But just as the mountain vagabond gave that fierce warning, his front door was flung wide by the very one whom he was so doggedly defending, and with a clear cry Alda Copeland sprang across the threshold.

Bright spots of color marked her cheek, and her big blue eyes seemed to flash fire as she flung forth a hand to indicate that bound and helpless figure.

"Hold him fast, Mr. Gayworthy!" she cried, sharply. "He's the man! I can swear to him as the ruffian who robbed me of—of—"

But there her voice faltered and broke, those twin spots being hidden by the wave of hot blood which flushed all her face.

She recoiled a bit, like one running up against an unexpected barrier, leaving that excited accusation incomplete.

Ten-strike Tom tightened his grip on Heber Kane as the big fellow made as though he would break away in flight, then spoke in cool tones:

"Robbed you of what, pray, Miss Copeland?"

Alda seemed unable to make immediate reply, and catching at his opportunity, Heber Kane hoarsely cried out his denial.

"I never! I'm not the man, I tell you, gentlemen! It's all wrong—all an infernal mistake, so far as I'm concerned!"

Heber Kane was obeying a perfectly natural impulse in making this hasty denial of so dangerous a crime, but, after all, he might have fared better through keeping tongue closer back of his teeth.

That denial seemed to nerve the maiden again, and quickly rallying from the confusion into which she had fallen, Alda retorted:

"I am not mistaken, sir! Put me upon oath, Mr. Gayworthy, and I'll say the same: that is the ruffian who tried to carry me off! He is the one who threatened me with still worse unless Uncle Cephas gave in to his terms and conditions!"

"I never—before Heaven I'm not the man, gentlemen!" hoarsely affirmed the cornered scoundrel.

"He is the man! And—he robbed me of—he did rob me!"

Through this hot interchange of accusation and denials Ten-strike Tom kept his prisoner fairly faced to the young lady, thus giving her a fair chance to fully identify the man; but now he spoke again, in the same slow, distinct tones he had used before:

"Will you be kind enough to state your loss, Miss Copeland? What was it this man robbed you of, please?"

Another brief hesitation, then the maiden cried out:

"I'm not at liberty to say more now, but—he stole a plug of tobacco from me—so there!"

Go-easy Dan Flick had been drawn from his loophole by that totally unexpected action on the part of the one he was so gallantly defending, staring open-mouthed as he looked and listened. But this proved too much for him, and he stepped across the threshold, giving a mighty breath and sonorous grunt before exploding with:

"Waal, I ber-durned!"

A half-smothered laugh broke from the amused cowboys who found subject for mirth rather than amazement in the idea of a fine young lady carrying a private store of chewing tobacco around with her; and it was this laugh, more than aught else, which served to nerve Alda Copeland and give her the power to defend both herself and her position.

"You at least will listen to me, Mr. Gayworthy," she said, moving a little nearer the Man from Denver and his prisoner. "I'll speak nothing more than the simple truth, on my honor as a woman!"

"Your bare word is good as law and gospel, Miss Copeland."

"I surely mean it to be, sir, and now—I swear that you now hold the ruffian who assaulted me, last night, when I left the Relay-station for the purpose of meeting my brother, Philo Copeland!"

"I never! She lies—under a mistaken impression!" hoarsely declared Heber Kane, making that addition probably because of the stern warning given him by Gayworthy's tightening grip.

"Make the dug gun critter 'fess up!" suggested the mountain vagabond, moving a little nearer the others, apparently forgetting all about his resolution to defend his home to the bitter end.

"Shall we fetch up the lariats, boss?" eagerly asked one of the cowboys. "Nothin' skil to the likes of a greased loop fer to fetch the naked truth out of a perffessional liar!"

"Steady, all!" gravely ordered the Man

from Denver. "Time enough for measuring forth punishment after learning just how great the crime is. And so—you positively identify the man who assaulted you, Miss Copeland?"

"I do!" came the firm assertion. "I know I am not mistaken when I say that this very ruffian caught me as I called out to him, thinking it was my brother whom I had agreed to meet last night. I tried to break away from him, but he held me until—until Mr. Whittaker came up, just in time to save me from his evil clutches!"

"It's all a mistake, I tell you!" desperately cried the accused.

CHAPTER XIV.

THAT BLESSED PLUG OF TOBACCO.

HEBER KANE flung all his muscular powers into an effort to break both bonds and the grip of his stern guardian, but in vain. Neither yielded, and though hearty assistance was proffered the Man from Denver, he rejected it with a grim smile.

"I can look after him, gentlemen. And you, my hearty, might just as well make up your mind to stand up to the rack and take the fodder provided for you!"

"Give me anything like a fair show, then!" surlily growled the big fellow, with a vicious side scowl at Alda Copeland. "The lady is 'way off her base when she makes such a foolish charge. I never—"

"He did—you know you did, sir!" passionately interjected the maiden, forgetting all else as she recalled her treatment at his hands, in connection with the more material loss she had suffered. "He robbed me, gentlemen! Make him give back my property, or—"

"Or make him pull hemp!" shrilly supplied Go-easy Dan Flick. "An' right hyar's the critters as'll do the hangman's part, too, bet yer life!"

Dropping his rusty rifle as he spoke, the excited veteran sprung toward Heber Kane with fiercely working fingers, and the bound man might have fared illy only for the prompt interference of Ten-strike Tom.

"Go easy, Daniel!" Gayworthy cried, stepping in front of his prisoner, to meet and baffle that ugly charge. "Don't make me dirty your rear profile again, just as I did before, my hearty!"

By this action, well meant though it was, Ten-strike Tom left Kane exposed to a fresh peril, for the cowboys sprung upon him, one rubbing the muzzle of a revolver under his nose, the other tearing open the heavy flannel shirt, then swiftly searching other portions of the big fellow's clothing in quest of the missing property.

The bound man gave a hoarse cry of angry fright, which attracted the notice of Ten-strike Tom, who wheeled to his defense just as Duke Vinson uttered a yell of grim triumph, followed by the words:

"Hyar she am, boss! Hyar's the madam's plug o' terbacker fer keeps! Who says he hain't ripe fer the rope—hey?"

In that lifted hand was visible a plug of tobacco, sure enough, and as she saw so much, Alda Copeland sprung forward with a low, almost choking cry, reaching forth a hand for the queer trophy as she came.

Duke Vinson grinningly relinquished his supposed prize, but it had hardly touched those white fingers before it dropped to earth, Alda giving a low, agitated cry of disappointment.

"Not—it isn't the right one!" she said, faintly, one hand rising to cover her heart as she fell back, leaning against a corner of the log cabin, like one faint and dizzy.

With an odd half-smile playing about his lips, Thomas Gayworthy watched and listened, satisfied just then to take no more active part in the affair.

Although it all seemed a whimsical enigma, a ray of light was beginning to penetrate that puzzling mystery, and Ten-strike Tom began to understand how Cephas Copeland had come to lose his gem-filled plug of tobacco!

With fading grin, Duke Vinson stooped to pick up the prepared weed, glancing ruefully from it to the young woman, then back again, before saying:

"Waal, didn't ye say so, ma'am? An' this is a plug o' terbacker, safe enough, hain't it, now?"

"It is not mine—not the one he robbed me of, though!" declared Alda Copeland, rallying once more. "That was longer, blacker, thicker; I heard—heard it spoken of as black navy, I believe!"

"An' this yer is nat'ral leaf!" sighed the cowboy, first viewing, then sampling, the confiscated plug of tobacco. "That does settle this part o' the business, then, fer shore! Nat'ral leaf hain't black navy, n'r you can't make the two come the same—no, sir!"

"I said the lady was mistaken, from the very first," Heber Kane declared, forcing his tones to steadiness as hope of escape seemed to revive. "I never touched her—never stole aught from her!"

The maiden sprung forward, pausing only when she was near enough to have touched that bruised and discolored visage with a hand had she seen fit to make the attempt.

For a brief space she stood gazing keenly into that face, a faint smile dawning upon her really beautiful countenance as those eyes slowly drooped before hers, unable longer to stand the test of nerve.

With a low, scornful laugh Alda called attention to that hangdog expression, then drew herself up alongside the prisoner, speaking clearly and swiftly:

"Look, gentlemen, all! Look at us both! Make the comparison fairly, and then decide: which one is the liar, this man or myself?"

"Go easy, all o' ye, critter!" blurted out Dan Flick, before any one of the others could chip in. "Ef ary one o' ye dast to say the little madam hain't plum' in the right of it, ye got to crawl all over me, an' that won't be no soft snap, ef I be called Go-easy Dan!"

"That's a bristle-up clean wasted, pardner," quietly observed Ike Dumphrey, after a grave glance from face to face. "We hain't gone clean crazy, an' them's the only kind as would ever hold a weenty doubt as to which one o' them is the liar."

"That's what!" vigorously affirmed Duke Vinson. "All he's fit for is to stretch a trail-rope, an' I know one that's jest honin' fer to hug his neck—yes, I do, now!"

Heber Kane gave a short, hard laugh in his desperation.

"What show have I got, anyway? If I deny the charge, you jump on my neck for calling the lady a liar! If I hold my tongue, you'll howl out that I ought to pull hemp because I don't dare to deny it! So—what sort of show am I getting, I ask you again?"

Ten-strike Tom flung up a hand which checked the tongues of the ready trio, then bowing gravely to Miss Copeland, he spoke as follows:

"If you will put your charges forth a bit plainer, please? You say that this man abducted you from the station, do you not?"

"I haven't been near the station for a month!"

"Quiet, Mr. Kane, unless you want a gap placed between your jaws," sternly uttered the Man from Denver, one hand lightly covering those heavily-bearded lips. "You shall speak in your turn, but just at present the lady has the stand."

The prisoner subsided with a sulky growl, not daring to fly in the face of that warning, backed up as it was by those burning black eyes.

Bowing in her direction, Ten-strike Tom added:

"Will you oblige us, Miss Copeland? You accuse this man of—just what, please?"

By this time Alda had fully recovered her wonted nerve, and in a voice which was perfectly distinct and steady, she told of her recent adventures, making all clear save the one important point: she said nothing about the reasons which led to her forming so strange an appointment with her brother, Philo Copeland.

After telling how she fell into the grip of the ruffian, and how she finally escaped therefrom, thanks to the opportune arrival on the scene of Jay Whittaker, she spoke more directly concerning her loss of valuable property.

"I can make oath th t I had the tobacco safely hidden on my person w'en I left the station, and even after that ruffian seized me through my unfortunate mistake," she said, positively. "And I discovered my

loss in less than five minutes after he took cowardly flight! And so I repeat: he robbed me, and I demand restoration on his part!"

"Shell out, or climb a tree, critter!" harshly commanded Go-easy Dan.

"You have heard the charges made, prisoner," gravely spoke the Man from Denver, turning toward Heber Kane once more. "What have you to say for yourself? What defense can you offer?"

"What I've already said, time and time again!" surlily answered the accused. "I never touched the woman. I never stole her tobacco; why would I, then? I chew the stuff, I admit, but I carry my own plug, and—"

"You deny everything then, Mr. Kane?" interrupted Gayworthy.

"Time without end—yes!"

"All right, far as that goes. Just keep an eye on the gentleman, will you, friends? And now—may I ask a word in private with you, Miss Copeland?"

The maiden flushed hotly at this, although she surely ought to have been prepared for something of the sort. Still, she could not see her way clear to a denial, and as the Man from Denver nodded toward the open door of the rude cabin, Alda entered in advance, standing with lowered gaze as Gayworthy pushed the door partly to, shutting off all inspection from without.

"I'll not keep you long, Miss Copeland," he said, gravely. "Just a word or two, to let you see why I am taking such a prominent part in this little affair."

"You may recall how your uncle talked with me, aside from all the rest, just after the road-agents ran away? Well, during that talk he told me just why he was so terribly wrought up over the loss of a plug of black navy."

"What! Surely he never— He wouldn't tell—"

"But he certainly did just that, Miss Copeland," cut in the King-Pin Sport, with a smile. "He told me of his hiding in that plug of black navy tobacco a fortune in diamonds—half a million's worth, he declared!"

Alda caught her breath sharply, shrinking further away from the speaker who so lightly made allusion to what she believed was a sacred secret from all outside of her own blood-kin.

"It's a dangerous secret, Miss Copeland, and there's no need to let that knowledge spread further than it has already gone. So, may I beg of you to guard well your tongue, leaving all the rest to my judgment? If you wish, I'll take my oath that I mean both you and your uncle well in this little affair."

Alda bowed her head, but spoke not. After waiting for a brief space Ten-strike Tom said, in conclusion:

"I'll take it for granted, then, Miss Copeland. Rest easy, I beg; all shall come out right in the end if any one man can so bring it about."

Leaving the cabin, Ten-strike Tom resumed charge of the prisoner, at the same time making a significant gesture which sent the two cowboys in advance down the rocky slope to where their horses had been left, while Go-easy Dan, with sundry uneasy glances backward, brought up the rear, rusty rifle once more tightly clasped in his right hand.

In sullen silence Heber Kane was forced by his guardian down that slope, finally being halted under a scrubby tree which afforded one stout limb growing nearly at right angles with the gnarled trunk.

Ike Humphrey had already secured aariat, and was now widening the noose for an upward cast, laughing grimly as the pliable rope shot over the limb mentioned, his practiced hand deftly catching the loop as it swung downward once more.

"All ready at this end, boss!" he reported, "Shell I?"

Ten-strike Tom took the proffered noose and let it fall over the head of the accused, drawing it snugly about that muscular neck, in spite of the effort which Heber Kane made to shake it off.

"Now then, will you confess the whole truth?" sternly asked the Man from Denver, gazing keenly into those bloodshot eyes.

"I never— This is bloody murder, men!" fairly howled Heber Kane.

"It is stern justice, rather. Now—confess, or you die like a dog!"

CHAPTER XV.

BEARING THE LION IN HIS DEN.

JAY WHITTAKER set forth briskly enough on his friendly mission, although the night was not yet fully spent, and he was by no means too intimately acquainted with the lay of the country.

Go-easy Dan had given him fairly minute directions, however, and he knew that he could not well avoid striking some portion of the extensive tract of land known far and wide as the C. Bar Ranch, so long as he headed due eastward.

It could hardly be deemed a cheerful trip, viewed from any point, and the young man certainly did not lack for thought-food during that first hour of dark riding.

For one thing, he was far from at ease concerning Alda Copeland, whom he had met that night under such exceptional circumstances.

A true lover will overlook much, and forgive still more, but Jay Whittaker was a man as well as lover, and while he had promptly enough fallen in with the plans of brother and sister, he could not help chafing against the lack of confidence implied by the secret those two had so far declined to share with him.

Why had Alda persisted in bearing Cephas Copeland company on this trip to the Deadwood mines, if she was resolved to desert her uncle before reaching the end of that journey?

Why was it so essential for them both to keep their vicinity a profound secret from the old gentleman? And—above all—why did Alda worry so seriously over the loss of a plug of tobacco?

It was with a feeling of half disgust that Whittaker found his thoughts ever revolving around that point, and as often would he try to banish the disagreeable subject.

Then, too, the ominous croakings of Go-easy Dan!

"Waal, boss, hyar's tryin' fer to hope Big Art McCoy won't stretch your neck fer ridin' of the wrong hoss, too!"

That grim sentence kept ringing through his ears until it really seemed as though the spirits of the air were mocking him, and by the time it was growing gray in the east, Jay Whittaker was prepared for almost any crooked deal of contrary fortune.

There was one fact connected with his brief sojourn in that part of the country which he had thought best to keep entirely from Alda, lest it still further sharpen her fears for her missing brother.

Brief allusion was made to it by Go-easy Dan during their talk apart from the worrying sister, but as the incident was fated to bear fruit in the near future, a brief explanation is due here.

It happened just after the young men came to that section in agreement with the understanding between brother and sister, and their first intimation of trouble came in the shape of a stern challenge over a leveled Winchester repeater.

With only head and shoulders in view, an athletic cowboy was "holding 'em up in great shape," and covered as they were, both men threw up their hands and called for a truce.

Then it was that, still holding them under his gun, the cowboy, who later on gave his name as Jack Hogan, made them plainly understand that at least one of the couple bestrode a stolen horse!

As a matter of course the friends made hasty explanations, talking so much to the point that the cowboy met them on a more equal footing, and expressing his faith that, as they declared, they were sinned against rather than sinners, finally agreed to accept a fair price for the horse in question, and call the matter square.

Upon that basis the matter was finally adjusted, Philo Copeland paying the comparatively trifling amount out of his own pocket rather than have any further trouble over the matter.

More than once the friends had laughed

over that odd happening, and laughed again when Go-easy Dan bluntly called them suckers for even nibbling at such a stale bait.

"Ef it'd bin his hoss, he'd 'a' shot fu'st, afore talkin', an' ef it wasn't his, then what rights hes he to skin ye; hey?" the mountain vagabond fairly exploded, when the story was told to him, that night.

This, then, formed a portion of the worry which tormented the busy brain of the volunteer as he rode more briskly through the first beams of the rising sun.

Philo surely would not have gone away with that party of horsemen, without compulsion, knowing as he surely did that there were few minutes to waste if they hoped to keep the rendezvous given them by Alda.

If he had been arrested under suspicion of being a horse thief, then, what better reception would await his arrival at the C. Bar Ranch?

With a low growl and squaring of his jaws, Jay Whittaker looked to his weapons, then rode more rapidly up a long slope, from the summit of which he expected to catch his first glimpse of the ranch buildings.

He had seen sign sufficient to convince him that he was now upon a stock-range, although there was an absence of fences or any save natural boundaries, and knowing that he had made no serious deviation from the course set him by Go-easy Dan, it was no great surprise which came to his eyes as he drew rein for a brief space when at that crest.

Far away toward the rising sun Jay Whittaker could just make out a few scattered buildings, with trees in fair proportion scattered about that portion of the landscape, all of which told him his goal was fairly in sight.

Thinking more of Philo Copeland than of himself and his own possible peril, the young man rode at a rapid pace down the long slope and as directly as might be for the ranch buildings.

Here and there were little bunches of cattle grazing, and at odd intervals he caught sight of a few horses, although he hardly believed he could be passing through the regular feeding-grounds of the C. Bar.

Having to cross a low swale which came very near being a miniature gulch, Jay Whittaker drew rein and sat for a brief space in busy thought.

"It'd look mighty odd for a man to come here afoot," he mused, his brows contracting as he patted the damp neck of his good horse. "And yet—wouldn't it be still nastier to buck up against the McCoy crowd with a bit of stolen horseflesh between one's legs?"

Again that ominous speech let fall by Go-easy Dan was ringing in his ears, and with a sudden resolve, Whittaker dismounted and tethered his horse there in the hollow, passing on and heading again for the goal of his mingling hopes and fears.

A long and low corral now cut off a fair view of the main buildings as he hurried along, and it was not until he was fairly rounding the lower end of this huge inclosure that Whittaker caught sight of his first human being since parting with Go-easy Dan Flick.

Then he came out almost face to face with a cowboy on foot, whom he nodded and spoke to, before either one recognized the other.

But then, just as Whittaker gave a sharp exclamation and was on the point of calling the fellow by name, Jack Hogan sprung closer, making a warning gesture to the rear as he spoke in swift, earnest tones:

"Keerful, boss! Don't give me 'way 'bout that p'izen critter, an' I'll help ye both out of a nasty fix—so I honest will, now!"

There was no chance for further speech on either side, for a big, well-clad, athletic-looking man just then rode forth from one of the corral entrances, and the tall cowboy skurried past the visitor like one bound on a most important errand, with very limited time in which to perform that same duty.

Close behind this giant showed a couple of armed cowboys, as though acting in the capacity of body-guards, and as the leading

horseman lifted a gloved hand in a mechanical salute, Jay Whittaker answered it, then advanced with the words:

"Good-morning, gentlemen! I'm looking for Mr. McCoy, and—"

"You've found your man, then, sir," crisply spoke the big fellow, his remarkably keen eyes swiftly sweeping over that figure the while. "My name is Arthur McCoy, and this is the C. Bar Ranch."

A hot flush leaped into the young man's face at this, although his gorge rose more against the manner and tone than the words themselves.

He seemed to read ugly suspicion in those glittering eyes, and as he stepped a little closer, one hand closed upon the butt of a revolver and his own voice turned hard and metallic.

"It's not you I want so much as it is a friend of mine, Mr. McCoy," he said, bluntly. "Where is he? I mean Philo Copeland, of course!"

"What do you want of him?" asked the ranchman in turn, his heavy mustaches curling with a half-smile, half-sneer.

"I want him! I want his liberty, if still living, or a life for each and every drop of his blood, if you've butchered him!"

As he spoke thus, Jay Whittaker jerked revolver from scabbard, like one who intends to play no mean part in the ending, if worst must follow.

But McCoy made no similar movement, leaning forward with elbow on knee, hand caressing his broad chin and a half-malicious twinkle in his sharp eyes as they gazed upon the young fellow.

"You're a bold, bad bluffer, Mr.— What is your name, by the way?"

"You can call me little old business, sir, unless you come down to meet me on the dead level!"

McCoy laughed shortly, then straightened up in his saddle as he made answer to that blunt speech:

"So long as the odds are all on my side, stranger, I can afford to swallow your bold bluff without a show of cowardice. And so—will you oblige me by coming up to the house where we can talk the matter over more at our ease, sir?"

Jay Whittaker was a bit taken aback by this unexpected mildness, but quickly rallying, he said:

"Wait a bit, please! First—is my friend, Philo Copeland, here, and alive?"

"He is, to both questions," came the instant response.

"All right, then! I'll meet you on your own stamping-ground, Mr. McCoy, and prove to you that you're not only in the dead wrong, but that the gentleman you've been treating as a horse-thief is—"

"Meaning this Philo Copeland, of course?" coolly cut in the giant ranchman.

"Of course I mean him. And now that I've—"

"Just one word on my side, please," with a graceful gesture. "May I ask how you know I have been treating this friend of yours as a horse-thief, my dear sir?"

A hot flush leaped into the young man's face, for he saw now how indiscreet he had been, and how seriously his hasty words might have weakened his cause; but rallying as quickly, he said:

"How do I know as much, is it? Simply because I know that Philo Copeland would never have ridden in your company, last night, save under compulsion, and out in this God-forsaken region, if any man wants to down another for any reason, it's always lifting stock!"

"Of which you'd scorn to be guilty, of course?" half sneeringly uttered the big ranchman. "But never mind that, just now. I've admitted the presence here of your friend, and now—Steady, all!"

That sudden break was caused by the swift approach of a young man on horseback, who came dashing around the lower end of the corral, waving his hat with a loud shout as he sighted that little group ahead.

"What's biting you now, boy?" sternly challenged McCoy, and back came the startling response:

"It's another of the stolen nags, sir, and—"

"An' right hyar's the hoss thief, too!"

yelled a hoarse voice as the loop of a lasso dropped over Whittaker's head, pinning both arms to his side!

CHAPTER XVI.

HELD ON SUSPICION.

THAT snaky coil dropped over the corral fence, but it was sent by the hand of an expert, and before Jay Whittaker could more than suspect what was coming, that noose had closed about his chest, hampering both arms for the moment.

Then he gave a fierce shout of anger, his right hand flying up as far as that tightening noose would permit, his revolver speaking viciously, sending its first bullet humming in dangerous proximity to the head of the giant ranchman.

Then strong hands gave that lariat a vigorous jerk, and as his balance was destroyed, Whittaker was pounced upon by the two cowboys who served Big Art McCoy as body-guard.

"Draw his teeth, lads, but don't harm him more'n you can help!" the master of the C. Bar Ranch called forth as he viewed that lively scene from his seat in the saddle. "Take him alive, as a running-mate for the other youngster!"

Hampered as he was by that rope, with a brace of muscular fellows bearing him to earth, Jay Whittaker was in very poor condition for a winning fight, although he made more of a show that way than the vast majority of mankind could have done.

He fired one more shot, but his lead went wild and harmed no one, then the revolver was knocked out of his hand, and he was fairly smothered by his antagonists.

Under direction of Big Art McCoy, the young man was bound, so far as his wrists and elbows were concerned, then he was lifted upon his feet and marched off in the direction of the ranch proper.

McCoy led the way on his saddle-stallion, and even then, when it seemed but a toss-up whether or no he was doomed to hang as a thief, Jay Whittaker couldn't help taking note of that odd peculiarity which helped to render the stallion notorious throughout the stock-ranges.

While perfectly shaped, and seemingly fully as serviceable as the others, one fore-hoof was much smaller, thus leaving a trail which could by no possibility be mistaken for any other.

By the time the prisoner was conducted to the house, Big Art McCoy had given his mount to a cowboy, had entered the building and was seated in cool comfort in a fairly well-furnished apartment which evidently served him as both office and lounging-room.

The cowboys ushered Jay Whittaker into this room, then placed him in a chair opposite the ranch-owner in obedience to a nod from their master, who said:

"All right, boys! You can go, now. If I want you for anything further, I know how to let you know."

Without a word the fellows beat a retreat, leaving host and guest facing each other, the one as cool and composed as the other was hot and full of fierce resentment.

"I'll make you pay through the nose for all this!" vehemently cried the prisoner, springing to his feet as though he would assault his captor in spite of his helpless hands.

"Don't you spoil all by playing the rank idiot, my young friend," coolly said the stockman, with nodding head and waving hand. "Will you oblige me by resuming your seat, or shall I summon my fellows to assist you?"

Something in those cool, even tones, and in those keenly glowing eyes served to hold the angry young man in check long enough for him to take a second thought. And as though he could read as much in that altering visage, McCoy spoke again:

"You are no fool, sir, so why act like one? Sit down, please!"

Jay Whittaker sunk back into the seat almost involuntarily, and as he did so, McCoy bluntly asked:

"Was that your horse they found in the hollow, back of the big corral, stranger?"

A hot flush leaped into the prisoner's face at this, but instead of giving the answer demanded he cried defiantly:

"Turn me loose and I'll answer you as man to man, you cur!"

Again the ranch-owner lifted a hand in calm warning, his eyes glittering like twin balls of living fire, yet his tones were calm and even enough as he spoke again:

"Don't fly off the handle altogether, young man. You're only damaging your own cause, can't you see it?"

"I'll see you in Tophet if you don't—"

"Steady, there!" with a trace of menace entering his voice as Jay Whittaker partly rose from his chair. "If you are really an honest man, my dear fellow, that is worse than foolish chatter."

"If you dare call me thief again, I'll have your life!"

"So you hinted before, but I'm not branding you as thief, just yet. I may have to do that in the end, but first—will you hear me out as a sensible man should, or must I call in my lads to huddle you still more effectively?"

That seemingly invulnerable coolness was beginning to work its cure, and with a surly growl Whittaker sunk back in his seat.

McCoy nodded his approval, then added:

"Now, that begins to look a little more like it, stranger, and I'll finish what I set out to say in the first place."

"If you are really an honest man—and I'm ready to admit that your good looks are just that much in your favor—it's worse than folly for you to kick and plunge; and if you're the horse-thief evidence indicates, you'd better save your breath to make your peace with the powers to come!"

"Are you through?" curtly asked Whittaker.

"So far, yes."

"Then it's my turn, and right here you have it, short if not sweet. I'm no more of a horse-thief than you are—a gentleman!"

With truly vicious emphasis issued those final words, but Big Art McCoy merely laughed, that biting shaft glancing harmlessly off his armor of proof.

"If that relieves you any, good enough stranger," was his cool comment. "But now we'll get down to sober business, and as a fair starter, let me put the thing like this:

"You and your mate were found in possession of stolen stock. Your mate failed to give a satisfactory account of himself when cornered, and so far you have refused to give any account at all!"

"If you had asked me, as one gentleman ought to address another—"

"Wait just a moment, please!" cut in the big stockman with a swift gesture. "You came here on what errand, sir?"

"To demand the release of an honest man whom you were holding in bonds, without even the ghost of a right to do so."

"And you came as another honest man, of course, sir?"

"Of course I did! And unless you butcher me—if I ever get free and able to meet you on level footing, I'll make you admit as much, or else send you to the devil, your patron saint!"

"And as an honest man you thought it advisable to hide your nag before coming here to make your appeal, of course?" sneeringly spoke the ranch-owner, plainly deeming that a home thrust.

And so it was, as Jay Whittaker admitted by his changing countenance, although he tried to carry it off as a passing trifle.

"Why not, since you had already insulted a far better man than ever stood in your shoes? But that isn't the main point, Mr. McCoy," forcing down his fierce rage as best he might, doing now what he might better have done at the send-off.

"Maybe I've been a little hotter under the collar than I ought, sir, but when a man finds such foul charges brought against him by—"

"Don't forget that there is solid ground for those same charges to rest upon, though," quickly interposed McCoy. "Both of those nags were stolen, and there are plenty of thoroughly responsible parties nigh to hand who can swear to both horses and theft."

"They can't even hint that either of us did the stealing, though, without swearing to a lie false as hell itself!" impetuously cried the young man, his eyes again aglow with fierce resentment.

"That may be true, but don't forget that—"

you two men were found with the stolen animals in your possession."

"Because we were deceived—because we paid out good money for worthless goods—must we be branded as criminals?"

"You mean you bought the nags, of course?"

"Yes, I do mean just that! We bought both horses just this side of Sidney, and paid a good price for them, too! We hold the papers to show as much, for we weren't all green, if you do seem to think so!"

"Who was it sold you the nags?"

"He gave the name as Jones: Bill Jones, he said."

McCoy flung out a hand with a low, scornful laugh, then added:

"The woods are full of Joneses! Can you prove this purchase, though, by any other person? What proof have you, in other words?"

Jay Whittaker hesitated briefly, then slowly uttered:

"Only by our word of honor, sir. I'm willing to make Bible oath—"

"And so would any horse-thief, if he thought that would save his neck from the rope of the common hangman!"

"Do you mean to insinuate that I am a horse-thief, sir?" fiercely demanded the prisoner, once more springing to his feet in hot anger.

Arthur McCoy likewise arose, pushing back his chair and gazing keenly into that flushed face as he sternly spoke:

"I'm casting no insinuations, sir. I am not even judging you, one way or the other, for there's a better if not a surer method of settling the matter."

"When those two horses, among others, were run off by rustlers, the eldest son of the owner was brutally murdered. I have already sent word for the witnesses to come and identify both nags and men, if they can do so, when we will—"

"They can never fix the crime upon our heads, unless they perjure themselves from start to finish, sir!"

"So much the better for yourself and mate, then," was the grim comment, as he lifted a silver whistle to his lips and blew a long, shrill blast. "For I give you fair warning: if ever those murderous thieves are identified, simple death will not be a priming to what they'll have to suffer!"

Whittaker changed color a bit at this, for he could not help fancying how easy it might be for another case of mistaken identity. Then he asked, in milder tones:

"You say there was a witness to that killing, sir?"

"Yes. One of his men saw the son killed, and declares he can fully identify the assassin if he ever meets him."

"Then that will let us out!" ejaculated Whittaker, with a breath of relief. "All we've got to dread is a malicious liar, or one who, like you, refuses to listen to reason!"

Just then the brace of cowboys put in an appearance in response to the signal given by their employer, and McCoy let that little slur pass him by without remark.

"You know where to stow the gentleman, lads; take him there at once," he curtly commanded, and the next moment Jay Whittaker was being hustled off in their strong grasp.

The journey was not long, and then, as the heavy door slammed shut with the sound of lock and chains, an eager yet dismayed voice cried:

"What? The devils have got you too, Jay?"

CHAPTER XVII.

MORE LIGHT ON THE SUBJECT.

HEBER KANE turned ghastly pale as he felt that noose tighten about his throat as the more than willing cowboys drew in the slack, only waiting for the word from Ten-strike Tom to play the part of hangmen.

Up to this moment he had felt a sort of fierce scorn for it all, never dreaming that they would dare go further than this, hoping to frighten a full confession from him.

But now—how different!

The Man from Denver was talking in deadly earnest, or his eyes were lying! He really meant to carry out his dread threats, or—

"Time's passing in a hurry, my pretty fellow!" came the oddly impatient interruption from the King-Pin Sport, breaking in upon

the flood of ugly thoughts which whirled through his dizzy brain. "For the last time, then, Heber Kane, will you own up to the solid truth?"

"I never—"

"Careful! You captured Miss Copeland, and you stole her plug of tobacco, didn't you?"

"I never—never touched her or saw it!"

As the prisoner fairly howled forth this denial, Ten-strike Tom stepped a bit aside, lifting his right hand with a sharp gesture.

A low cheer broke from the cowboys as they swung their full weight upon the rope, jerking Heber Kane off his feet, and then raising him a few inches fairly clear of the ground!

It is no easy task to pull even a small man "up a tree" without the aid of pulley or tackle, but Dumphrey and Vinson felt an especial spite against this big fellow, and did not spare their muscle in the least.

The Man from Denver stood so he was face to face with the doomed wretch, and as the writhing body slowly swung around with the stretching of the lariat under his weight, Gayworthy likewise shifted his position, never for an instant losing sight of those staring, bloodshot eyes and that rapidly discoloring face.

Past experience told him that not one man out of a thousand could resist such a convincing argument, and he fully expected a sign of submission from Heber Kane; nor was he disappointed.

"Let him down, boys!" he cried, sharply, as the hanging wretch made a hideous gurgling sound, at the same time writhing and struggling in a most repulsive manner.

The cowboys obeyed promptly enough, but their faces showed only too clearly that they felt defrauded; but briefly though the Man from Denver had acted as their leader, it was sufficiently long for them to fully recognize a master.

Ten-strike Tom caught the accused in his arms as he was lowered, and supporting him until he could fairly feel his feet again, Gayworthy swiftly breathed into his ear:

"Play white, act sensibly and I'll save your life, Kane! If not—if you still persist in lying over it, then I'll hang you so high the bluebirds'll nest in your hair before you can fall to earth!"

Although that suspension had lasted barely a score seconds in all, his own weight had made it a terrible test for the big fellow, and he had to make several efforts before he could utter an articulate word.

But at last the answer came, and proved to be all Ten-strike Tom could have hoped for.

"I will—anything—everything!"

The King-Pin Sport instantly flung off that slackened noose, at the same time speaking in a half-jesting manner to the far from satisfied cowboys:

"That ends the first part, gentlemen! Mr. Kane is bashful—terribly bashful, in fact, and this little throat-trouble makes the matter worse instead of better. So—will you oblige us, please?"

"Waal, boss, I reckon you know what you're talkin' 'bout, but billy-be dug-gun ef I do!" exploded Ike Dumphrey, after a brief hesitation.

"That's what!" supplemented Duke Vinson.

"In still plainer speech, you're calling for more light? Good enough, and I'm not so certain that I'm blaming you, gentlemen. And so—right here you have it!"

"Brother Kane has come to look upon me as a sort of father confessor, but he is too bashful to make his first confession before an audience, and so—I'll make it all right with you both, boys, in the end!"

Ten-strike Tom pointed his meaning still plainer by a light wave of his hand, and without raising any distinct objections, Dumphrey and Vinson slowly drew apart from the others.

At the same time Gayworthy led his prisoner away for a few yards, far enough to insure secrecy, yet still keeping in fair view of both the dangling lariat and the log cabin.

The big fellow seemed completely cowed, obeying a word, a sign, a touch of the hand, and when he had sunk down upon a convenient log, Ten-strike Tom stood before him blurted out:

"Now then, Kane, what have you done with that plug of tobacco?"

Those bloodshot eyes lifted to meet that keen gaze, and the accused made hoarse reply:

"I never saw it, sir, so help me—"

Heber Kane cut himself short, with a low, almost savage cry, while his face lighted up with a glow to match the tones in which he added:

"That sly old devil! Did he— Was that it, then?"

"Was what it?"

"Was that the trick? Oh, if I'd only known! And all the time—he had it hidden in that cursed plug of tobacco, then?"

The prisoner fairly writhed as he spoke, his face turning purple, his eyes threatening to pop out of their sockets, and only for the stout thongs which confined his arms, he might have still further injured his luxuriant crop of hair.

Through it all Ten-strike Tom stood in front of the bound man, cool and calm, betraying no unusual emotion, although it surely seemed as though the mystery was on the point of solution.

As Heber Kane ceased, choked by his fierce agitation, the King-Pin Sport coldly asked:

"Was what hidden in the tobacco? Talk straight, pardner, or you'll climb yon tree, and that without scratching the bark with your boots, too! Was what hidden there?"

Heber Kane stared at the speaker with an expression on his face which was little less than idiotic. His fierce rage and chagrin had so completely carried him away that he could not at once comprehend just what was expected of him; but then a surly growl parted his lips and he uttered:

"What is it to you, anyway?"

"Less than it is to you, of course," coolly said the King-Pin Sport as he stood gazing down upon the flushed face of his captive.

"A great deal less, Mr. Kane. I'm merely asking through idle curiosity, and there's not the odds of a dollar either way, so far as I'm concerned."

"Then why are you so infernally set on pinching a fellow?"

"But as for your honest self, that's different," pursued the Man from Denver, just as though the other pair of lips had not opened at all. "Vastly different, my dear fellow! For it means either life or death to you, just according to your method of answering, Mr. Kane!"

Slow and distinct came that last sentence, as though he who uttered the words wanted each one to take full effect; and Heber Kane gave a low, husky growl as he shrunk from that cold yet scorching gaze.

Thomas Gayworthy had served his time in days gone by as manager of a "sweat-box," and that experience told him now his words and manner had produced the desired effect.

Squatting down upon a rock in front of that on which the big fellow had been seated, the King-Pin Sport spoke again, in a milder, almost confidential tone:

"Come, pardner, don't you reckon we've wasted time enough? I've all the patience in the world with a man of common sense, but when it comes to handling an idiot—well, that's a gray horse of another color! And so—what was hidden in that plug of black navy, do you reckon?"

"The papers, of course! What else could it have been?"

Surlily, almost snarlingly, yet plainly the answer of one who was in sober earnest, after all!

Ten-strike Tom wore an impenetrable mask just then, and his face told no tales as he spoke again:

"What papers do you mean, Kane?"

"Why, the— Didn't old Copeland tell you that?"

"It isn't what any one else may have told me, but what are you going to tell me, dear fellow. Shall I repeat? What papers, please?"

"The deeds to the Hobgoblin Mine, of course!" moodily muttered the cowed wretch, his head drooping upon his chest.

Ten-strike Tom was more than surprised at this answer, although he quickly began to see just how the wretch might have oc-

curred. Nothing of this showed on face or in voice as he asked:

"That was what you were playing so risky a game for, then, Kane? You wanted to get those deeds into your own possession?"

"Why wouldn't I, then?" with fierce emphasis, though still retaining that dejected attitude. "That cunning devil! He skinned us from start to finish! He caught us in a tight pinch, when we hadn't money or credit left—when we were fairly up a stump!"

"And bought you out for a song, is it?"

Heber Kane nodded his head sullenly.

"Just about! And so—well, we only wanted our just dues, sir," he added, lifting his head and speaking in more natural tones. "We wanted to get the papers back, then we'd have returned his cursed money, and called the trade off! Is that such a terrible crime, then?"

"Well, it looks as though you were trying to run both sides of the swap, anyway," retorted the Man from Denver, with a little chuckle at the queer notion. "Of course what Copeland preferred cut no figure at all?"

"If he got his money back, wasn't that square enough?"

"You seem to think so, anyway, but maybe he'd carry different views. But now—excuse me a moment, won't you?"

Turning toward the mountain shack, Ten-strike Tom lifted his voice and summoned its owner. Go-easy Dan came with scant delay, for his curiosity was strongly excited by what he had seen and heard, so far.

"Waal, boss, what's the ticket?"

"Do you know anything about the Hobgoblin Mine, over Deadwood way?"

"She—waal, now I will—easy, go easy!" fairly spluttered the vagabond, squatting with hands on bent knees as he stared keenly into the prisoner's face for a brief space.

Then he drew back, making an excited gesture as he cried:

"Easy, go easy! Durn my hind huff ef it hain't, then! An' me never so much as—yit I done felt in my bones as I'd ort to place the p'izen critter, for—easy, go easy, Dan'll!"

"You recognize the gentleman, then?" curtly asked the King-Pin Sport.

"Go—don't I, then?" came the spluttering reply. "He's the boss o' the Gobbler Mine, over to Deadwood, an' ef it wasn't—glory to the marster!" Flick cried, breaking off with a wild gesticulation.

"What's biting you now, old fellow?"

"And the agent as was shot! I knowed—Bill Tankwright! An' Bill was mixed up in that same Gobble Mine! An' that looks like—boss, shore's sartain them same cusses did the holdin' up of that hearse!"

"I never—it's all an infernal lie!" hoarsely cried Heber Kane.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A DOUBLE CONFESSION.

THE two cowboys had been keeping curious watch over the King-Pin Sport and his prisoner, and as they saw Go-easy Dan summoned, they felt at liberty to move forward likewise.

They were near enough to catch the full purport of that disclosure, and their excited gestures boded ill for the prisoner.

But Ten-strike Tom still held command, and at a wave of his hand, the cowboys held their peace.

"You can join in, gentlemen," he said, lightly. "We'll make it a free *seance* for once, as I reckon Brother Kane has passed the super bashful point by this time."

"To jest think o' him—Easy, go easy!" muttered the mountain vagabond, staring half-dazedly at the prisoner. "An' him all the time a-playin' spectacle thar at Deadwood! An' him a dug-gun road-agent all the time!"

"It's a lie—a foul slander!" harshly vowed Heber Kane, glaring viciously from face to face, then striving with all his vast muscle to burst the bonds that held his arms powerless. "Set me free, you cowardly curs, and I'll make him eat his lying words!"

"Easy, go easy! I kin lick him ef he was bigger'n a mount in!" the veteran spluttered, tearing off his ragged slouch hat and dashing it to earth, where he stamped upon it as he gave a warlike prance and curvet. "Turn him loose, boss! Jes' do sot him at libbe'ty,

an' ef I don't flax him out fer— Oh, come an' see me, critter!"

Laughing in spite of himself, Ten-strike Tom put forth a restraining hand and bade the valorous vagabond simmer down a bit.

"If there has to be any fighting here, I prefer to look after it myself," he added, in graver tones. "You can watch and listen, but that's your limit for the present. Will you simmer, or must I send you back to the shanty?"

"Easy, go easy! I'm done shet up like a clam, boss!" meekly muttered the veteran, picking up his hat and slouching it over his eyes.

Ten-strike Tom turned toward the prisoner, speaking swiftly:

"You are the liar, Heber Kane, and here goes to prove it. Listen to me decently, or I'll have you gagged and hopped!"

"You took passage on the Deadwood stage as a sort of decoy, your principal part being to let your confederates know there was no mistake as to their prey being aboard. To do this all the easier, you engaged an outside seat, beside the driver!"

"I never—you can't prove what isn't true!" huskily muttered the accused, but plainly shrinking before those glittering black eyes.

"I'm going to prove every word of it, and that out of your own mouth, Heber Kane," coldly retorted the Man from Denver. "You stuck to the same coach taken by the Copeland party, and when the ambuscade was reached, you gave the signal which told your fellows their game was inside the stage."

"You kept the driver from trying a dash through the hold-up, and so made the rest come easier. You were one of the first to set the passengers a sample of meekness and submission; you were the first one to be searched, and loudly howled about the loss you were suffering, the more surely to avert suspicion from looking your way."

"It was through no fault of yours that the hold-up failed to prove a complete success, and you might still have won your point if the fellow I knocked over had been slain outright; but you saw that he was alive, and feared lest he make full confession, thus bringing your neck to the noose!"

"I never— You devil!"

"That is why you took his horse and rode off as though in chase of the other agents, but you didn't go so far you couldn't keep an eye on the stage and—my poor self!"

"You watched your chance and lay under cover until we came along, when you took a pot-shot at me while—"

"I swear I never did anything of the kind!" hoarsely interrupted the accused, his face now fairly blanched by terror.

"And I swear you are a liar!" coolly retorted the Man from Denver. "I put you to flight, and from the very spot where you lay in waiting to murder the man you feared might have received the dying confession of your confederate, Bill Tankwright, I saw you ride away across that little valley beyond the ridge."

"I followed you that far. I marked your trail, so I would know it again, no matter when or where met with. I fancied I had recognized both horse and rider, but kept my own counsel lest I unwittingly injure an honest man."

"Then you picked up Miss Copeland when she left the station to join her brother, and I found your trail. I followed to where these men had your neck in a noose, and saved your life in order to save the young lady."

"You know how we found her, by a lucky streak, and you know what was the result: afraid she would recognize and expose you, you tried to run away at the risk of your hide. Now—what have you to offer, Kane?"

The prisoner gave a shiver at those words, but his drooping head did not lift, and barely audible were the words:

"Are you—oh, you are the devil himself!"

"Keep to that belief if it does you any good, Heber Kane, but don't forget one thing in addition: if I was devil enough to mark each and every one of your footsteps from start to finish, just so certainly am I devil enough to pay you for all, unless you buy your life and liberty!"

"You've got to make a full confession. You've got to make a clean breast of it, answering any and all questions I may see fit to put to you, or else back you go to the station, where the stage men will hang you higher than Haman!"

Shivering like one sitting in an icy draught, Heber Kane rallied his powers sufficiently to attempt a feeble defense:

"There was no real harm done, sir. 'Twas nothing but a little joke, when all's told, and you hadn't ought—"

"It's a little joke that will end in the noose of a rope, Heber Kane, unless you can make a better show than that. Go on, please!"

The fellow was thoroughly cowed by this time, and realizing the utter folly of even attempting a denial of the facts so pitilessly set forth and linked together by the Man from Denver, Heber Kane complied.

He told of his coming to the Black Hills in quest of a fortune, and how, after many a bitter disappointment, he and his partners had struck a more than fair prospect, which they dubbed the Hobgoblin Mine.

They took out barely gold enough to pay expenses, although they felt confident that better fortune lay just ahead of them; but the hard fight against heavy odds finally proved too much for them, and receiving what was then considered a pretty fair offer in cash for the mine, the partners decided to sell out.

As the senior partner Heber Kane was intrusted with the duty of closing the deal and receiving the money, which he did, only to find, on his return to Deadwood, that his partners had at last struck a marvelously rich lead, which added twenty-fold to the value of the Hobgoblin!

"What was to be done, then?" added the miner, now looking and speaking more after his customary manner. "I knew the old villain wouldn't yield an inch, much less offer to call the trade off! I saw enough of him there in Omaha to set him down at his correct caliber! a miser who would cheat his dying mother out of a counterfeit penny!"

"And so you concluded to take to the road, eh?"

"What other show had we, then? He hadn't paid one-twentieth part as much as the Hobgoblin would sell for in open market! And so—oh, the devil's own luck!" Heber Kane groaned, letting his head droop until chin touched chest once more. "Only to think of it! That infernally sly old devil!"

"To hide the title deed in a plug of black navy! And—Bill had it in his own hands, too! And I never for an instant suspected what old Copeland was kicking up a terrible row about!"

His savage chagrin was almost ludicrous to those looking on, however bitter it might be to the criminal himself; but the Man from Denver was hardly satisfied yet, and at a peremptory gesture from him the trio of witnesses held their peace.

"You played your part almost to perfection, Brother Kane, and your running-mate, Bill Tankwright: was he such a failure, after all? You surely did get hold of those valuable papers, didn't you?"

Heber Kane gave a start at that speech, but shook his head vigorously as he lifted it to squarely meet those glittering black eyes.

"No, I never! Who could have suspected such a hiding-place as that? And—only to think! Billy had that very plug in his hands! He even took a chew—oh, curse the bitter black luck of it all!"

There was no room left for doubting the perfect sincerity of the detected road-agent now. Even if Gayworthy had not known, through the offer of Cephas Copeland to make him a present of those title deeds, by way of reward, in case he should recover the lost diamonds, that the papers had escaped the clutches of the robbers, this passionate outburst would have set all doubts at rest.

And yet—where had those diamonds gone to, if this man had not taken them from the maiden?

That point of the case was still left in utter obscurity, and with faint hopes of still winning more light, the Man from Denver postponed any further questioning of the prisoner, speaking to Go-easy Dan:

"Will you keep Mr. Kane company for a few moments, pardner? He might grow lonely if left entirely alone, and I wish to see the young lady for a word or two."

"Easy, go easy!" said the mountain vagabond, wagging his frosty pow with vigor. "Will I? Won't I, better say! Fer I've bin a-summin' of ye all up, boss, an' I'm free to say that I don't reckon you're nigh as nasty as I tuck ye fer, fu'st off!"

"Thanks, most heartily," laughingly acknowledged the Man from Denver. "Just keep a friendly eye on our pretty fellow, Daniel. Don't crowd him too close for comfort, but don't let him take a walk—just yet!"

"Easy, go easy! You jest bet I will an' I won't, to the both of 'em, boss!" vigorously spluttered the veteran.

With a meaning look and nod for the two cowboys, the Man from Denver turned toward the cabin, through the still open front door of which he could just cast a glimpse of feminine drapery, which he knew could only belong to Alda Copeland.

Touching his hat as he reached the rude step, Gayworthy spoke to the young lady in low, mellow tones:

"I beg your pardon for wishing to intrude, Miss Copeland, but there are a few words I really ought to say, and— May I, please?"

With a slight flush marking her cheeks, the maiden drew back, and the Man from Denver entered the cabin, pausing near the threshold to say:

"We have coaxed yonder fellow to confess, Miss Copeland, and he admits pretty much everything save touching the—your property."

"He must be speaking falsely, sir! How else could it be missing? I know I had it only a short time before, and he alone— Oh, sir, can't you make him give it back to me?"

"That's what I've been trying to do, until— But I fail to strike even a single clue! If the road-agents didn't steal the plug from your uncle, how could it have passed out of his possession?" asked Gayworthy, with feigned innocence, wrinkling his brows as if in troubled thought.

"I—I took the tobacco from Uncle Cephas!" murmured Alda, faintly.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE STORY OF THE DIAMONDS.

THIS was the very conclusion the Man from Denver had drawn from such facts as he had been enabled to collect, while by putting this and that together with the aid of a little imagination, he had reached a tolerably correct idea as to the entire case, up to the as yet mysterious vanishment of the diamond-studded plug of tobacco.

Yet he was desirous of having those shrewd guesses fairly confirmed, and at once acted as he thought most likely to bring that about.

Giving a little start as of amazement, if no worse, he drew back a pace, gazing upon the fair culprit as one might upon something as dangerous as it was beautiful.

"You stole—surely my ears deceived me, Miss Copeland?" he muttered in a tone to match that dramatic start.

The maiden flushed hotly as her head went back with a touch of hauteur, eyes flashing with proud resentment against such a choice of words.

Ten-strike Tom again willfully misinterpreted her, drawing a long breath as he ejaculated:

"Pardon me, Miss Copeland, I beg. I might have known my clumsy ears were in error, for surely you wouldn't—er—of course not!"

It was a purposely clumsy speech, but it brought about the desired end, and Ten-strike Tom was not the man to grumble at lowering himself a peg or two in the young lady's estimation.

"Is it right to call it theft, when one simply takes full possession of one's own, Mr. Gayworthy?" asked the maiden, her face paling again, but that being her sole sign of weakness or of confusion.

"I don't—would you mind making it just a little bit clearer, Miss Copeland?" almost meekly asked the Man from Denver.

Alda hesitated a bit, but then said:

"What was it Uncle Cephas told you, sir,

back there, just after the robbery was foiled?"

"About his loss, do you mean?"

Alda bowed assent, and the King-Pin Sport quickly explained:

"He told me he had been robbed of a fortune in diamonds, Miss Copeland. He declared that fortune amounted to a clear half-million. And he made the startling assertion that the plug of tobacco inside of which he had placed those diamonds for safer conveyance, had been stolen from his bosom while in the stage!"

"And he was right in saying so," steadily confirmed the maiden, now cool and composed, so far as outward seeming went. "I took the tobacco from his bosom, myself. I replaced it with another plug of the same size and general appearance, trusting that the exchange would not be detected until—until much later than now!"

Ten-strike Tom did not have to feign curiosity now, for he was literally full of it. He longed to ask for a still more complete explanation, but hardly dared to run the risk.

"It was unlucky, then, that those fellows chipped in, wasn't it? And yet—if they had taken the tobacco, maybe it would have been more readily recovered!"

Alda made a passionate gesture of mingled despair and doubt.

"I surely thought that man robbed me! I can't make it seem otherwise, even now! And yet— Surely he would have kept it with him, rather than risk losing it through hiding?"

"I don't believe he had or has even the ghost of an idea as to the treasure which was really concealed in that plug of tobacco, Miss Copeland," gravely declared the Man from Denver. "I have pumped him dry, and know that he has told the whole truth, at last. He was after the title-deeds to the mine your uncle bought in the Deadwood gold region."

Alda shook her head, dejectedly. That loss, coming just when she fancied the worst of her troubles were left forever behind them, affected her strongly, and she was beginning to show the strain upon her nerves.

"He failed in his prime object, I know," added Gayworthy, as the maiden failed to speak in her turn. "Your uncle offered to give me those very deeds as reward for recovering his lost diamonds, as you may have heard. And now—poor old gentleman!" with a sigh which he manufactured for that express occasion.

Alda gave a little start at that expression of sympathy, but the Man from Denver again put his own construction upon the movement, and quickly added:

"Sad, isn't it, Miss Copeland? How I do dread going back and telling the poor old fellow that his diamonds are lost—almost surely lost forever! No doubt they represent the hard toil of years, and— Ah!"

He started back a pace with an ejaculation as of surprise, for Alda flung out a hand in a gesture which fell little short of being a blow!

"Stop!" she cried, with bitter emphasis. "You don't know what you are talking about, sir! His diamonds? His loss? His hard toil and— Oh, sir, if you only knew that awful man as I have learned to know him! If you could even guess at the horrible truth—as—"

Thomas Gayworthy saw his chance, and quickly took advantage of it.

"Wouldn't it be the part of true wisdom to show me the truth from your standpoint, Miss Copeland, rather than leave me to guess at it?" he said, speaking warmly, yet careful not to give cause for fresh alarm on the maiden's part. "Since I have sworn to recover these lost diamonds, if possible, oughtn't I to learn who has the best right to the valuable property?"

"We have!" passionately exclaimed Alda. "That property belongs to brother and myself, by all laws, both human and divine!"

The Man from Denver drew nearer, taking her hand in his strong grasp as he earnestly spoke:

"Prove this to me, Miss Copeland, and I'll do my level best to give you back your own again, uncle or no uncle!"

Alda shrunk a little at this speech. Gayworthy at once released her hand, drawing back a trifle in his turn, then gravely added:

"Don't think I'm trying to force your

confidence, madam, for such is not my intention. If you think I am not to be trusted—"

"It isn't that, sir," swiftly interjected the young woman, lifting a hand as though to check his speech. "Only—if they were only here! Yet—I will trust you, sir!"

Gayworthy at once moved a stool closer to the agitated girl, then stood by in grave silence, waiting for the confidence which he felt was of far more than ordinary value.

There was a brief pause, as though Alda hardly knew where to begin her explanation, but then she spoke in rapid, husky tones:

"We hardly knew our father, Philo and I! He was away from home so much, even before mother died. And after that—we hardly saw him at all, and only heard from him at long and irregular intervals."

"Father had always been a restless sort of rover, now here, now there, constantly in motion, making a fortune only to lose it again before its possession could fairly be realized, at least by us, his children."

"The last letter that came home from him was from the African diamond fields, and in it he said he was rapidly winning a fortune; that he intended coming home with it, to settle down and devote the remainder of life to his children!"

"Then—Uncle Cephas, with whom we were then living, hastily set sail for the Continent, only leaving a hurried scrawl to let us know he was going to meet his brother, our father, who was lying seriously ill."

"Uncle Cephas never even told us where father was taken ill, nor from whom he learned of that illness; just that brief announcement! And the next tidings we had came from his own lips when he returned home, more than a long month later."

"And that tidings was?" gently asked the Man from Denver.

"The worst! Father was—gone!"

"Poor girl!" muttered Gayworthy, as Alda bowed her head, vainly trying to smother the sobs which had cut her story short.

Alda quickly rallied, brushing the tears from her eyes, a glow of indignation seeming to dry up the moisture. Her tones grew almost metallic, and there could be no doubt as to her perfect sincerity, now.

"Cephas Copeland vowed to us that his brother died a pauper! That he would have filled a pauper's grave, only for his open-handed generosity! And all the time he was hugging to his bosom a fortune which had been given him by that same brother, in sacred trust for his orphaned children—Philo and I!"

"Those diamonds, you mean, Miss Copeland?"

"Yes! The diamonds father really sacrificed his dear life for, wearing himself out under that awful sun which—don't make me speak of it further, I implore you, sir!"

The Man from Denver took her hand and pressed it gently. His sympathy was genuine, and it seemed to calm the maiden after a bit. Then she resumed the story of the lost diamonds.

"'Twould take too long to give you all the details, sir, besides, I hardly think it essential. Enough that uncle seemed to change his whole nature from the day of his home-coming, and before a month had passed he had quarreled with Philo, forbidden him the house, and vowing to show me the same scant mercy unless I obeyed his commands to the very letter."

"He said he would leave all his property to me, provided I declined to have aught further to do with my poor brother, and would remain true to him, my uncle! And I—I agreed to obey his harsh will!"

"In seeming, or in reality?" gently asked the Man from Denver.

"It was fighting fire with fire!" cried Alda with a short, bitter laugh. "Long before this promise was given, I had become convinced that Uncle Cephas was defrauding us, and I feigned submission to his barbarous demands solely to put the truth past all doubting."

"I played my part with a degree of skill and patience which I certainly could never have attained had my own interests been the only ones at stake; but—there was poor brother Philo!"

"Who understood just why you yielded to the unjust demands of your uncle, of course?" suggested Gayworthy, in hopes of quickening the progress of that confession.

"Of course," with a half-impatient nod of her sunny-crowned head. "He didn't like the idea at first, but when I showed him how certainly the will of our poor father was being balked—well, I had my way!"

"And then?"

"And then I never rested until I learned the truth: that Uncle Cephas had a fortune in precious stones which he most jealously guarded by night as by day!"

"Wonder he didn't put them in a safety deposit vault!" muttered Gayworthy, almost as much to himself as to the maiden.

"I believe he was afraid to do that, lest we find some record of the fact," quickly said Alda, catching his meaning. "And I believe that same fear kept him from disposing of the diamonds or turning them into property which could be less easily traced!"

"But let all that be as it may, the facts remain that when Uncle Cephas made up his mind to pay the Deadwood District a visit, ostensibly to examine some mining property in which he had lately invested, he insisted on my bearing him company lest I should again fall under the influence of—my poor brother!"

"Did he intimate as much as that, Miss Copeland?"

"Well, not in so many words," admitted Alda, then quickly adding: "I made no objections to bear him company, because I hoped to win back our fortune while on the trip—and that's why I stole the tobacco!"

CHAPTER XX.

THE KING-PIN SPORT'S SOLUTION.

THOSE last words came sharply, almost defiantly from the maiden's lips, and her big blue eyes squarely met the jetty orbs of the Man from Denver, as though challenging his condemnation.

Thomas Gayworthy read that demeanor aright, and made the best of it.

"It was not stealing, Miss Copeland. You had a perfect right to reclaim your own property, surely!"

"And it was ours, sir!" cried Alda, her tones breaking a little as she found that sympathy less easy to withstand than she would havest criticism. "I never acted until I held ample proofs; I could go before any court in the land and prove our perfect right to those diamonds! And now—gone!"

"They shall be found again, Miss Copeland, never fear," gravely assured the Man from Denver. "I have passed my word to that effect, and while I may have given it to the wrong party, still I'll make my pledge good."

Alda gave him a grateful look, then said:

"If you can only do just that, sir! I'm not asking you to believe my statement, unsupported by proofs. I have them ready: I can prove beyond the possibility of a doubt that those identical diamonds were in the possession of our poor father when Uncle Cephas reached his death-bed! And—more—I can prove that the stones were given to uncle merely in trust for us!"

"Then you shall have your own, Miss Copeland, if I can bring it to pass," earnestly declared the Man from Denver.

Before he could divine her intention, Alda caught his right hand and touched it with her warm, red lips.

"Wait, please!" she said, with a swift gesture that checked the words rising to his lips. "Let me explain everything, now the subject has been broached, for I may never again pluck up courage sufficient."

"Thanks. If it will not task you too severely? After all, it may help me to a clue which you might have overlooked," earnestly said Gayworthy.

"I must tell it all, sir, so—please listen!"

"I found out how uncle was conveying the diamonds, and that gave me an idea how to accomplish my ends. I procured another plug of tobacco, which I arranged just as he had the one containing the diamonds, and when the road-agents stopped our stage, I made the exchange without his so much as suspecting the truth!"

Ten-strike Tom gave a low whistle which

but imperfectly expressed his surprise at such extraordinary nerve on the part of a girl. Where nearly any one of her sex would have been frantic with fright, Alda Copeland had employed those moments in such sleight-of-hand!

"But—surely you couldn't have counted on any such hold-up, my—Miss Copeland, that is?" he ejaculated, half perplexed.

Alda smiled at his amazement, and even gave a brief little laugh.

"No, sir, of course not, but when the opportunity came, I made the most of it. I pretended to be awfully frightened, and while clinging to uncle's neck, screaming and begging for mercy, I—well, I suppose you would call it stealing!"

"I call it wonderful, rather!" declared the Man from Denver, but as he saw how pained the maiden was, under her assumed defiance, he quickly passed that point by, saying instead:

"And your brother, Miss Copeland?"

"Philo understood what I hoped to accomplish, and in company with a trusty friend, Mr. Whittaker, he also made the trip, but in a different manner. They came on horseback, keeping away from the stage-trail far enough to avoid awakening Uncle Cephas's suspicion, yet near enough to our line of progress for me to drop them word at regular intervals."

"I had resolved to bring about the end of it all at the very station next to the spot where those robbers halted us, and so I warned my brother and—and his companion."

"I meant to leave the stage at that point, and if I failed to coax uncle in lying over for a stage, I meant to feign illness. And then—well, I promised Philo that I would not come to him empty-handed!"

"I understand. You were perfectly right, too, Miss Copeland," gravely assured the Man from Denver.

"I thank you for your faith, Mr. Gayworthy," earnestly spoke the maiden, but still with pained looks and troubled eyes. "There is not very much more to tell, but I might as well finish it up now!"

"When Uncle Cephas turned so ill, I saw that my ruse need not be attempted, for he himself said that our journey must be delayed. At first I was dreadfully frightened, fearing he was seriously ill, and if such had been the case, I resolved to bring brother Philo to his side, telling uncle all that had happened, all that I had discovered; then giving him back the diamonds, I meant to beg him to treat us as his only brother's children deserved to be treated!"

"If you only had stuck to that notion!" the Man from Denver could not help ejaculating. "And yet—"

"Uncle Cephas would have clung to the stolen diamonds, and cursed us all for trying to trick him into doing his duty!" bitterly cried the maiden. "If you knew him as thoroughly as I do, sir, you wouldn't give such a wish room!"

"Come to think it over again, I'm not so sure but what you are nearer right than I was," frankly admitted Gayworthy. "Still, by so doing we'd know where the diamonds really were, while now—"

"They are no more certainly lost to us, their rightful owners, than they would be in his miserly clutches!" impetuously interposed Alda, her little hands clinching, her big blue eyes fairly aglow. "But—I saw that uncle was not dangerously ill, and that my absence could hardly make him worse. And then—Let me finish, please!"

"I gave him his morphine powder, such as uncle always uses when he feels the need of a sound sleep. I waited by his side until he grew quiet, then I stole out of the building to keep the appointment I had made with brother Philo."

"Instead, I fell into the clutches of that evil wretch, out yonder, and he—surely he must have stolen the diamonds, sir! If not, where could they have vanished to? For I know I had them safely in my possession only a few moments before he caught me up in his arms!"

"You are positive there was no mistake in the plug, though?" asked Ten-strike Tom, quickly, touching a point which had begun to bother him not a little. "Might you not have been cheated, too? If that plug—"

He cut himself short as Alda lifted a checking hand, and she spoke:

"I thought of that possibility, sir, and before leaving the station I made certain the diamonds really were in the plug of tobacco. Then I put it safely inside—I secured it firmly, as I still believe, sir, and as I say, I felt of it only a few seconds before that wretch captured me through my mistaking him for brother Philo!"

The King-Pin Sport listened intently to all this, then nodded his head understandingly.

"Still I can't believe that Heber Kane robbed you, knowingly, Miss Copeland, though no doubt he was the prime cause of your losing the diamonds."

"Of losing them?" echoed the maiden, with a sudden start.

"Just that!" confirmed the Man from Denver, speaking with conviction. "I satisfied myself fully that Kane never even suspected the existence of any such treasure. He was after the title deeds to the Hobgoblin Mine, and gave thought to nothing else. And when he captured you, it was on the impulse of the moment, no doubt fancying that through your possession he might make terms with your uncle."

"And—the diamonds?"

"I believe they were lost out of your dress, either while you were struggling with Heber Kane, or when you broke away from his arms, just before the coming of your friend," slowly declared the Man from Denver.

Alda stared at the speaker for a few seconds in seeming bewilderment, then flung up her hands with a gesture of utter despair.

"Then it is lost—lost forever! Oh, what will poor Philo say when I have to tell him how— Oh, why did it happen so?"

"It surely isn't as bad as all that comes to, my dear," soothingly said the King-Pin Sport, looking as though he would like to offer still more effectual sympathy, as the girl sunk down upon a stool, burying face in her trembling hands.

"How could it all be worse?" sobbed the maiden.

"Well, there is at least a clue in your trail," suggested the Man from Denver, after a brief pause, as though for reflection. "By striking that, and then following the course your captor took—"

"I haven't the ghost of an idea where it was, or whither I was taken!" despairingly said the sorrowing maiden. "And then—my brother! And—and Mr. Whittaker—oh, why don't they come back? What is keeping them so long away, when they surely must know—unless they are—are dead!"

"Come, come, my dear child!" half-soothingly, half-sterly chided the Man from Denver as a hand softly stroked that bowed head. "You are letting your nerves run away with your reason now! Both the young gentlemen are safe and sound, and will be putting in an appearance here almost before you know it, now!"

"Do you really think so, sir?" asked Alda, looking up and forcing a wan smile as she met that encouraging gaze. "If I could only believe—"

"You surely can if you try to, my dear. And now—listen to my solution of it all, please!"

"Of course your friends will expect to find you here, when they come back, so your part is readily settled; you must remain here in Go-easy Dan's cabin, while we go—"

"Alone?" faltered the maiden, paling again at the bare idea.

"Don't you think that for a moment, my dear!" with a grim smile which proved his words were more than half in earnest. "I wouldn't trust you without good guards, lest I come back to find you away on another wild excursion!"

"Oh, sir, I never thought—"

"And I'm engaged to do the rest of your thanking for you, please bear in mind," cut in the Man from Denver, with a short laugh. "I'll put the two cowboys on guard, and take Go-easy Dan with me, to test his merits as a trail-hunter!"

After a few more words which still more clearly explained his hopes of recovering the lost diamonds, Gayworthy left the maiden and went back to where Heber Kane was being guarded by the trio.

Giving the prisoner a grim hint that he

had better not leave his seat upon that comfortable bowlder without due permission. Ten-strike Tom drew the guards aside far enough to make sure the prisoner could not catch their words.

As briefly as possible he made his intentions known, asking Dumphrey and Vinson to remain as guards at the cabin, to protect the lady and to keep the man in safety.

"I'll see that you don't lose anything by doing this, my lads," he added, then turning to the mountain vagabond with the words:

"I want you to go with me, Daniel. I'm going to look for the plug of tobacco which Miss Copeland lost, and I may need your good eyes."

"Easy, go—waal, ef that don't git me! Terbacker? Ef it's jest a chaw what's wanted, why I kin furnish 'nough fer to—"

"Wait until we find that plug, and you'll be a little wiser, Daniel!"

CHAPTER XXI.

LOOKING FOR THE LOST DIAMONDS.

THE Man from Denver spoke sharply, a touch of impatience betraying itself in his tones, just then.

All had not been going so smoothly as he could have wished, and the mannerisms of the mountain vagabond, however whimsical they might seem at first, were apt to pall with repetition.

Go-easy Dan gave a grunt and a toss of his frosty pow, both of which hinted at injured dignity, and there was a peculiar twist to his thin lips as he covertly eyed the King-Pin Sport.

If Thomas Gayworthy had not so much food for thought, or if he had fairly caught a look into those shifty eyes just then, matters might possibly have taken an entirely different turn.

But before the Man from Denver had finished his brief instructions to the brace of cowboys, Go-easy Dan seemed his usual self once more, and without even a suspicion of deceit or possibly worse on the part of his chosen companion, Gayworthy mounted his horse and rode away from the mountain shack.

Go-easy Dan kept no horse, or other mode of locomotion than his own legs, but that hardly delayed the progress of the trail-hunters, thanks to the broken nature of the ground across which their purpose led them, the old man more than once forging ahead, to cast a half-malicious look backward with the words:

"Go easy, thar! Shell I take a squat an' wait fer ye, boss? Ef I'd jest a-thunk fer to fetched a rope, I mought 'a' giv' ye a tow!"

On the whole, the Man from Denver took these occasional gibes in good part, for the longer he pondered over the lost diamonds, the more plausible did his latest theory appear.

"She surely must have lost it out of her bosom while trying to get away from that rascal," a portion of his musings ran. "The most likely point is at or near where she broke away from him, just before young Whittaker came up. And if so—why can't we find it?"

"There's nothing to destroy the tobacco; man and goat are the only two animals filthy-mouthed enough to eat the weed! And the plug might lie there for ages before either ran across it, save by accident, or like us, out searching especially for it."

"And so—it surely must be there, and if there, we've got to find it: we've just got to find it!"

As the couple drew nearer to the line which Ten-strike Tom had drawn after losing the trail as the most likely one to be taken by the abductor, he gave Go-easy Dan his reasons for such belief, and after listening intently, the mountain vagabond gave a little grunt, then shifted their course a couple of points.

"Don't you worry the head o' ye, now," he said, half-pettishly, as Gayworthy seemed about to correct his course. "Ef I hain't on the right line, then you've got turribly mixed up in your figgers! 'This is the way to hit off the scent you laid, an' ef we don't ketch a smell—go easy!"

Ten-strike Tom yielded with a fair grace.

After all, what matter? They had nearly the whole afternoon before them, and should Flick have drawn a wrong conclusion, that could easily be corrected, later on.

But before another hour had crept by, Gayworthy was a convert to the general belief in the vagabond, as a master in the art of trailing, for Go-easy Dan not only struck that lost spoor, but time and again pointed out sign which those keen black eyes had overlooked.

They had hit off the trail at a point further from the station than Ten-strike Tom had been able to follow it, and though here the nature of the ground made it especially difficult for the human eye to pick up the trail, Flick was hardly ever at a loss, at times seeming to follow the scent like a hound, by his nose!

All this consumed time, as a matter of course, but there was quite sufficient in it all to hold the interest of the Man from Denver, and he was still eagerly taking lessons in that quaint art when Go-easy Dan gave utterance to a short, grim grunt, followed by the usual words:

"Easy, go easy! Thar! Ef it wasn't, then why'n thunder would I be sayin' so, boss?"

One bony hand reached out to indicate something several yards in advance, while its mate gripped the King-Pin Sport firmly by the arm, holding him back until his less practiced eyes could make out that sign.

It required but a single moment for that, and then a glad ejaculation burst from the younger man's lips.

"That's the place where she made her break!" cried Gayworthy, freeing his arm and springing forward, bending low as though he fully expected to pick up the lost treasure without further ado. "All eyes open, now, pardner! If you find that lost plug before I sight it, I'll give you its weight in yellow boys!"

"Go easy—go easy! Ef it's that—geard!" spluttered the old man, seemingly more amazed than overjoyed at such an extravagant offer. "An' it jest a plug o' black navy? Jest a hunk o' terbacker, sweetened up with 'lasses an' lickerish, an'—waal, ef that don't jest knock me silly, then I wouldn't begin fer to say so!"

"Find the tobacco first, old fellow, and then you'll get a fresh wrinkle on your horn," curtly answered the Man from Denver, without once turning his eager eyes from that close search.

But the discovery was not to be made so readily, although the two men faithfully quartered their ground, using the best possible judgment in their method of pursuing the quest.

They first scanned the ground ahead and to both sides of the crooked trail for several yards, making sure the lost tobacco was not lying exposed anywhere within those brief limits.

Then they stooped lower, carefully turning over every leaf, stick and stone—everything, in short, which could by any possibility have been cast over the missing plug of tobacco.

This was a slow and tiring process, but it was the only sure one, as Ten-strike Tom reasoned out. By sticking to it as long as that trail lasted, they would surely find the lost property, provided it really had been lost at the time believed.

But then, after much time and patience had been expended, the searchers came to the point in the crooked trail where Jay Whittaker had first chipped in, that fact being plainly indicated by the plunging hoof-marks left by the buckskin gelding, and the first scattering drops of blood shed by Heber Kane.

Go-easy Dan drew himself erect at this, giving an inarticulate grunt as he shook both shoulders and head.

"Go easy, all!" he exploded, a little later, as Ten-strike Tom likewise ceased that fruitless search. "Somethin's got plum' out o' gee with the calc'lations, hain't they, boss? 'Pears like to me that—Eh? Who's that a-comin' this way like—Take to kiver, boss!"

With a swift leap and hasty skurrying the mountain vagabond sought shelter behind the nearest cover, bringing his rusty rifle to a ready as his long neck craned around for a cautious look.

Ten-strike Tom likewise gripped a gun, but he made no attempt to hide, his first keen look recognizing a figure, at sight of which an exclamation of surprise burst from his lips.

"It's all right, pardner!" called forth the station-keeper, Frank Knifton, throwing up a hand in token of amity as he came quickly forward, followed by the one whose appearance there had so amazed the Man from Denver: none other than Cephas Copeland!

An instant later the old gentleman recognized Gayworthy, and rushing forward with wildly-gesticulating hands, he hoarsely cried out:

"Where is she, the ungrateful girl? Show me where—Just let me catch her! She robbed me! She drugged me, first, then stole away my—"

"Steady, sir!" sternly cried the Man from Denver, gripping an arm with one hand, while with the other he closed those abusing lips. "I'll not let even you insult a lady after such fashion, Mr. Copeland!"

Something in his glowing eyes, even more than his words, cowed the old gentleman, and at a sign from Knifton, Gayworthy released him.

Stepping apart with the station-keeper in obedience to the signs given by the latter, Ten-strike Tom looked inquiringly into that face.

"He hired me fer to guide him 'long your trail, sir," came the hurried mutter by way of explanation. "He swore he'd jest got to find you in a holy hurry, an' so—Waal, I done the best I knowed how! An' yit—Durned ef I don't b'lieve he's crazy as a dancin' bed-bug—so thar!"

There really appeared to be some foundation for that belief, as Ten-strike Tom could not help admitting in his mind as he covertly watched the face and actions of the old gentleman.

Of course he was at no loss to account for that startling change in the demeanor of the old gentleman, knowing as he did all about the mysterious disappearance of those diamonds; but, none the less, he found it far from easy to decide just what ought to be done with Cephas Copeland.

Left in a measure to himself, Mr. Copeland rallied from the damper so unexpectedly put upon him by the Man from Denver, and once more began abusing his absent niece, declaring over and over that she surely must have taken with her that precious plug of tobacco!

"He spoke even more plainly after Gayworthy again tried to check his half-crazed tirade, but finally he ceased, looking fairly worn out by his own fierce passions."

Through it all Go-easy Dan had been taking close notes, twisting his wrinkled face up into knots, only to untwine them and form others no less intricate; but now he slouched nearer the Man from Denver and spoke in a guarded voice:

"He hain't fitten fer mo' work like we've bin a-doin' of, boss. An' so, why not tote him over yender to my shack, whar the ledy is, an' let 'em settle it atwixt 'em jest which one really owns that dug-gun plug o' black navy?"

"That might be the wisest way out of the woods, for a fact!"

"Easy, go easy—be course she am! An' then, when they sort o' fix the trouble up atween 'em, why, ye see, we kin know jest who to give the terbacker to—when we stum'le acrost it—don't ye see, boss?"

"If we ever do!" muttered the other, gloomily, for the first time showing signs of losing faith in the success he had vowed.

But the suggestion offered by the mountain vagabond was a really valuable one, considering the frail condition of the old gentleman, and by promising to bring him face to face with his niece, Gayworthy found little difficulty in inducing Cephas Copeland to consent to the trip.

Assisting him into the saddle, Gayworthy paused barely long enough to thank the station-keeper for his services, and to let fall a hint that he should be no loser by it in the end.

"Which I'd stick by ye to the eend, sir," declared Knifton, as he gave Copeland a sturdy hand-shake. "Only thar's the stage, an' business comes afore pleasure! So-long! Good luck ride on yer shoulder, sir!"

As the worthy fellow hurried away to look after his duties, the Man from Denver likewise set forth, leading the black horse which he had resigned to the elder gentle man.

Very few words were spoken during that journey, for Copeland seemed too ill, both in mind and in body, while Ten-strike Tom felt sorely "down in the mouth" over his failure to find that diamond-studded plug of tobacco.

He had been so confident of success, too. And now— It was hard!

"Go easy!" cried Flick, as he first sighted his cabin. "What hes— The devil's broke loose, an' thar's some o' his nasty work!"

He pointed to where lay a human form, seemingly cold in death!

Ten-strike Tom gave a fierce cry as he recognized the body lying only a few feet in front of the cabin door.

CHAPTER XXII.

IS IT A DEATH-TRAP?

As that cry came to him from out the obscurity, Jay Whittaker recognized the voice of his friend, Philo Copeland, then there came a rush of an indistinctly seen figure, and he was caught in the strong arms of the man whom he had come hither to rescue!

Young Copeland gave a cry of angry amazement as he felt those bonds, and then his fingers sought out the fastenings, working as busily as his tongue was wagging.

"How did the devils nab you, Jay? Surely you never—and Alda? Why did you leave her? Or—did they capture you before you met the little girl as we promised? She surely isn't— Holy smoke, man, dear! can't you talk at all?"

"I'll talk fast enough after you've set my arms free, never fear," grimly uttered Whittaker, facing the side of the prison where he knew the door must lie, though his eyes had not yet grown accustomed to that disagreeable gloom.

"And Alda: she's all right?"

"When I parted from her, yes."

"All right! Knowing the little girl's safe and sound, I can work to better advantage, although the fellow who—steady, boy! I've got an edge on the knot at last!"

Five minutes more of persistent work produced the desired effect, and as his bonds fell away, Jay Whittaker drew a long breath, springing straight for the place where he had by this time fairly located the door.

"Never a bit of use, old man!" grimly assured young Copeland as the other strove to either burst down or tear open that nail-studded barrier. "I've given over all that sort of folly, ages and ages ago!"

"By what right—"

"That's pretty much what the rats say when they're caught, I fancy, old fellow!" out in Philo, with a hard, reckless laugh. "And we're two rats, caught in a cage which can only be opened by that big devil, McCoy, or—by the hand of death!"

The final words seemed forced from his lips by a power greater than his own, and then the comrades in misfortune turned and met in an ardent hand-clasp.

Neither one spoke for several minutes. A spell had fallen upon them, and while its chilling influence lasted, neither cared to risk his tongue in speech.

But neither man had aught of the craven in his blood, and it was not so very long before their courage rallied, and they sat side by side on the bare floor of their prison cell, talking in little more than whispers.

Each had explanations to make, and as the eldest in bondage, that of Phil Copeland came first.

The account he gave of his capture proved how shrewdly Go-easy Dan had interpreted the confused sign left there on the hillside, for he had fallen in with a little squad of cowboys led by Big Art McCoy, who at once placed him under arrest on suspicion of being a horse-thief!

After this, Copeland's experience was pretty much such as Whittaker had to relate, since his defense was the same (with a single addition), while the ranch-owner gave him the same grim warning before consigning him to that strong if rude cell.

"It'll surely come out right in the end, since no honest man can or will swear to us as being either the thieves or the murderer,"

asserted Copeland, but with an undercurrent of uneasiness, for all.

That one exception had been noted by Jay Whittaker, and in giving his own experience he touched upon it.

"I saw the very fellow you spoke of, Philo! In fact, he was the first person I met after striking this infernal ranch!"

"What? Surely he isn't—not one of the men employed here?"

"He surely is though! It's lucky you didn't mention the name he gave—unless that was a lie, also!"

"I couldn't recall it, just then, but now I remember: Jack Hogan!"

"Whist!" in a sharp whisper, slipping a hand over those lips just in time to disguise those syllables. "Maybe I'm a fool for thinking it, but— Well, it's at least one frail chance in our favor!"

Then Jay Whittaker went on to mention what the cowboy so hastily muttered at their brief meeting, just before Big Art McCoy appeared upon the scene.

After telling how he fared in his interview with the autocratic ranch-owner, Whittaker once again took up that frail hope, dwelling upon it more at length than he might have done had he less to bother his brain in another quarter.

For, contrary to his hopes if not his expectations, Philo said nothing whatever concerning the secret which Alda had admitted keeping from him, her accepted lover!

True, Whittaker himself made no allusion to that secret, passing by the apparently serious loss which the maiden had suffered, but when he spoke of Alda's having fled from her uncle, surely 'twould have been no more than natural and right for Philo to reveal the real cause for all those strange movements?

The two friends in trouble were still busily discussing their ugly situation, together with ways and means of playing even with their lawless captors, when sounds came to their sharpened ears from without, followed a few moments later by the opening of the door.

They were crouching as though to leap at the throats of those who might put in an appearance, but hesitated as they saw the giant figure of Arthur McCoy, both hands grasping pistols, evidently wholly on his guard against a possible break on their part.

"Steady, gentlemen!" came his stern warning as that barrier swung open. "I'd hate to do you harm, but I'm going to hold you fast until the witnesses I've sent for can have a fair squint at you both!"

"You look and act the cowardly cur!" hotly cried Jay Whittaker, as he stepped toward the ranchman, shaking a quivering finger full in his face. "If it wasn't for giving you an excuse for adding murder to your other crimes, you overgrown cur, I'd dirty my hands by tweaking your nose!"

"As it is, you're simply making a fool of yourself, for you know as well as I do that I could make your heels kick your brains out," coolly retorted the big fellow, putting up his pistols and lowering his arms as though deliberately inviting an attack.

It is highly probable that he would have been gratified, great as the odds surely were in his favor, only for the prompt action of Philo Copeland, who flung arms around the body of his friend, jerking him back as he muttered, hastily:

"Don't ruin all, Jay! This isn't our time, and— Quiet, man!"

"That's not the worst advice you ever received, Mr. Whittaker," the master of the C. Bar Ranch declared, his tones growing milder as he added: "Here is a supply of food and drink, gentlemen. And let me state that I am expecting those same witnesses to reach here not later than this time to-morrow. Then—I'll apologize, or you'll climb a tree!"

"You wouldn't dare to—" began Jay, only to break off abruptly as he caught a fairer sight of the cowboy who brought the wide board loaded with hot coffee in its pot and plenty of eatables.

"If they swear to you, I'd hang you though you should prove yourself the President of the United States!" sternly affirmed McCoy, then motioning his fellow to pass out ahead of him.

It was now Whittaker's turn to put restraint upon Philo, for that young man had just placed the cowboy, and once more the

name of Jack Hogan was smothered upon his very lips.

"Silence, for your life, man!" whispered Whittaker, looking anxiously over his shoulder toward the door, where sounded the rattle of chains and the snap of a key in lock. "I believe— Wait until we're safe against intrusion, man, and then—wait, I say!"

When silence reigned without as within, Jay Whittaker stooped over the improvised tray upon which their food rested, and presently gave a low, almost fierce exclamation as he found what he was seeking.

"I knew it!" he said in guarded tones as he drew back to where his comrade was impatiently waiting. "Look! A bit of paper, and matches! I saw the fellow slip them there, and make the sign which— Steady now!"

Flattening out the bit of paper which had been rolled around several matches, Whittaker struck one of them, and by the flickering light thus supplied he managed to decipher the rudely-written words:

"Don't you give me way, boss, an' I'll set you loose tonite. I'll be on guard from the middle o' the nite, anyway, an' mebbe afore. You kin count on me to a ded morul!"

Philo read this by craning head over Jay's shoulder, and as both reached the end and the tiny torch gave its final flicker, they turned to look in each other's face as though seeking confirmation there.

"If he really means what he says, but—"

"Wonder if it's anything better than a dirty attempt to run our necks into a still worse trap?"

Almost simultaneously came those doubts, and then the friends in trouble drew back to the rear of the cell, squatting down side by side to talk it all over.

The treacherous manner in which they had already been dealt with hardly helped to reassure them, and it was hardly strange that they should at first doubt the sincerity of the cowboy, rogue as he had been so plainly proven.

"If we should try to break away, wouldn't McCoy claim he had a perfect right to shoot us down like thieves?" slowly asked Philo Copeland.

But then, as Jay Whittaker recalled his loved one, picturing to himself her loneliness, her danger, even, there in that mountain shack with no more reputable guardian than Dan Flick, he harshly exclaimed:

"That settles it! I'll take my chances if Satan himself opens the door!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

FROM FRYING-PAN TO FIRE.

PHILO COPELAND was not so swift to decide, although he was fully as eager to win liberty as Whittaker possibly could be.

The longer he thought over the matter, the more he suspected a cunning snare underlying that proposition.

"He played the cur when he lied us out of our good money," formed a portion of his reasoning. "He showed himself a sneak when he begged you to keep his secret until telling it could do you no good; for if you were to make the whole thing known to McCoy right now, the rascal would swear 'twas only a bald-headed trick to work yourself free, through getting another fellow into trouble!"

Jay Whittaker more than half believed this way himself, yet his decision was formed, and he now determined to stick fast by it.

He spoke more freely of Alda and the embarrassing position in which he had been obliged to leave her. He spoke of her sore trouble in case neither brother nor lover should speedily return to her assistance.

"It's an infernally nasty muddle!" groaned Philo, bowing head upon joined palms as he crouched there with back to wall, neither prisoner paying any heed to the appetizing odor coming from that well-laden tray of food, just then.

"So nasty that we can't well make it worse, no matter what steps we take," declared Whittaker, in dogged tones. "And that's why I say it all over again: I'll make a break for freedom if there is the bare ghost of a show!"

Presently the fragrant steam from the hot coffee claimed their attention, and in spite of a gruesome suggestion from Philo that the food and drink might be "doped" for their especial benefit, the young men soon cleared the tray of all that could pass down their throats.

For some little time they hoped Hogan would come to remove the tray, but after the passage of an hour or so, they abandoned that hope, and once more fell to discussing their disagreeable situation.

In spite of the fair promises made them by Big Art McCoy, neither Jay nor Philo could believe that anything like fair play would be shown them, even if their lives should be spared until after the arrival of the witnesses the ranch-owner asserted he had sent for.

"The best of 'em would commit rankest perjury rather than miss the chance of a hanging-bee!" gloomily asserted the young prisoner. "It's a dead open-and-shut, I'm thinking, old man!"

"All the more reason for our giving Jack Hogan a trial, then," Jay declared, grimly. "When he comes—"

"Will he come, though?"

"If he comes, then," and they talked it all over again.

It seemed an endless chain of hours before aught happened to break in upon that awful monotony, but then another liberal supply of food was pushed into the dark room, together with a couple of blankets. McCoy, who brought these articles, curtly bade the prisoners good-night, after which they were once more left to their own company.

In spite of their strong suspicions of a trap, it proved no slight disappointment to both Jay and Philo when they failed to catch sight of Jack Hogan.

At the same time, it told of a growing faith in the cowboy, when the master of the C. Bar Ranch was permitted to withdraw without that name being mentioned by either of the young men.

Time crept along with painful sluggishness after that, and it really seemed as though the night must be wholly spent before Jack Hogan gave any sign of his presence.

The prisoners were startled by a cautious tapping at the closed door, and after fairly locating the sound, they drew that way, Whittaker putting lips close to the barrier as he called out in guarded tones:

"Who are you, and what's wanted?"

"Easy, fer love o' life, gents!" came back a swift, agitated reply. "It's jest to let ye know that I'm gwine fer to keep my part o' the barg'in, though it'll send me over the divide in a holy rush ef the boss was to ever smoke—stiddy, then!"

For Whittaker was fiercely smiting the immovable barrier in his hot impatience, and at this repeated warning he spoke sharply:

"Open and give us a show then, confound you! If you're honest, and mean to play us white, why don't you show your hand?"

"Beca'se I dassen't, jest yit, gents," hastily came the excuse. "I'm clean white, an' you'll hev to 'mit as much in the eend; but I don't dar' try it on ontel later, when the plantation's snoozin'. Fer right now—Big Art hes years longer'n a donk, an' sharper'n his two eyes—which is wuss'n needless!"

That voice died away, and only strained ears could have distinguished those last few words.

No answer came back to the pounding which Jay Whittaker gave that iron-studded door with his clinched fists, and after a useless spell of waiting, the prisoners once more drew back to the further wall, there to crouch down side by side and in whispers discuss the situation.

More than ever did they suspect the existence of some devilish snare underlying that proposition, yet never once did either of them declare their intention of refusing that offer; all their talk was upon the best method of foiling the trap and turning the trick to their own advantage.

By the faint glimmer of their last match, Jay Whittaker saw that it was nearly one o'clock, where they had felt confident day must be on the point of breaking. And then, only a few minutes later, another signal came to their ears through that heavy door.

This time it was followed by the cautious

working of key in lock, and then the barrier swung open, to close again just as swiftly; only now another dark shape stood inside the room.

A stream of light came from a lantern as the mask was turned, and after flashing it over the prisoners, the new-comer turned the light upon his own face, quickly speaking in lowered tones.

"Thar hain't much time to waste, pardners, an' so—hyar's fer ye! I sort o' played ye dirt, t'other day, but I reckoned you'd ruther pay a few skads sooner than take yer chancies of pullin' hemp! An' so—waal, ef I hedn't skun ye then, I wouldn't be tryin' to save yer pelts now!"

While speaking after this fashion, the cowboy placed his lantern on the ground where its light would be masked from the door, then produced a couple of heavy revolvers, holding the butt of one toward each of the prisoners as he added:

"Ef I was thinkin' o' playin' ye more dirt, I wouldn't be doin' like this, would I? Hyar's a couple o' guns I swiped fer ye, gents. Mebbe they hain't quite up to them as ye lost when the boss tuck ye in, but they kin bark an' bite, ef ye know how to use 'em! Now—eh?"

The friends interchanged swift glances, but neither one offered to grasp the weapons thus generously proffered. And as Hogan stared in amazement, Jay Whittaker coolly spoke:

"We'll play you just as white, stranger, and before taking your guns we'll make known our terms. You are to bear us company until we are safely off the C. Bar Ranch, or else—"

"I cain't do it, boss! I jest cain't do it that-a-way!" hastily protested Hogan. "The boss set me on guard over ye, an' ef I don't foolish him clean—it's good-by John! He'll strip my fool pelt too quick!"

"How did you reckon to deceive him, pray?"

"By sw'arin' you coaxed me inside, 'long of playin' mighty sick, then bounced me an' left me trussed up too tight fer kickin' or squealin', don't ye see?"

Another interchange of looks, then came the firm decision:

"We'll amend your story, Jack, and in this way: You'll say we forced you to bear us company until we'd secured our own weapons and horses, then trussed you up and left you on the flat of your back, for the early birds to discover! How'll that suit your ideas, Hogan?"

"I won't play it that way, sir. Unless you take up with my offer—"

"Unless you fall in with this, our final decision, Jack Hogan, we'll stay right where we are now, and when McCoy comes again we'll tell him just how we paid you for the very horse he accuses us of stealing!"

The sorely-troubled cowboy vainly strove to alter this decision, but the prisoners flatly refused to even argue the case with him, and in sullen despair the fellow finally agreed to fall in with their wishes.

Through closely questioning him, they found out that their weapons and horse equipage had been placed in a sort of storehouse, the lock of which might be turned by the same key which had given him admission to the place they now occupied.

Taking the revolvers at first declined, making sure they were both loaded and in serviceable condition, the two plucky young fellows bade Jack Hogan lead the way to the outer air, Whittaker grimly adding:

"Guard your skull if there is a snare lying in our way, my pretty fellow! I'll kill you, if it's my last act in life!"

Jack Hogan volubly protested his honesty, and after again warning them against making any noise, he led the way out of that dark prison, both Whittaker and Copeland drawing long and grateful breaths of the fresh night air as they stepped out beneath the stars!

All was silence about the premises, and keeping as much under shelter of the shadows as might be, Jack Hogan guided the young men across to a substantial building which stood apart from all others, and which he softly assured them was the storehouse where their confiscated property had been placed, pending their trial as horse-thieves.

"Ef we kin git all out safe! Ef thar don't

anybody smell a mice an' jump on our necks!" uneasily muttered Hogan while unlocking the massive door which barred their entrance. "Now—oh my God!"

For at that instant there came the vicious explosion of firearms, and with a horrible scream of agony, the cowboy pitched forward upon his face in the now open doorway!

CHAPTER XXIV.

A TERRIBLE DISCOVERY.

LYING there in front of the little log shack, the last beams of the setting sun lighting up both face and figure, was the body of Duke Vinson, the taller of the cowboys whom Ten-strike Tom had left in charge to guard Heber Kane and to protect Alda Copeland.

Pausing barely long enough to make out so much, the Man from Denver jerked a revolver out from its scabbard, then sprang forward to the cabin itself, shouting aloud as he came:

"Miss Copeland! Oh, Miss Copeland—where are you?"

Only the echoes of his own voice made answer, flung back by the grimly frowning rocks hard by.

Springing through the open door, Gayworthy took in all at a glance, seeing that the being he sought certainly was not under that roof.

He turned and sprang outside, just as a sharp ejaculation came to his ears from the lips of Go-easy Dan Flick.

"Hyar's the other lad, but—whar's the leddy? Whar's the dug-gun whelp as ought to've pulled hemp at the jump-off?"

For once in his life the mountain vagabond was startled out of his odd mannerisms, but Ten-strike Tom was by far too intensely excited himself to take note of that fact.

He was quickly alongside the veteran, who stood near the fringe of scraggy trees which bordered the rocks to the left front of his cabin; and there, partially hidden by the foliage lay poor Ike Dumphrey, blood showing upon his ghastly pale visage and marking his clothing.

For only the space of a single breath did Ten-strike Tom stand there, then turning away he began a hunt for that other one: Heber Kane.

Not that he really expected to find the villain, either dead or living, for he felt almost certain that all this red work must lie at the door of that scoundrel.

Who else could or would have so mercilessly butchered the two cowboys? What possible cause for that butchery save the freedom of that arch-schemer?

Thanks to the nature of the ground close about the little cabin, it took but little time to make perfectly clear the expected fact: Heber Kane was not to be found in that vicinity.

"He must 'a' done it all!" muttered Go-easy Dan, as the two men stuck to their investigations, paying not the slightest attention to Cephas Copeland for the time being. "But how did he ketch the drap? How come he fer to git his han's free an' onto a gun, 'thout ary one o' them pore critters ketchin' on to his doin's?"

That was a portion of what Ten-strike Tom was trying to find out, but with an almost total lack of success. There were no signs left by which that red enigma could be easily solved.

There was the boulder on which they had left Heber Kane seated, but there were no traces of a struggle, no signs of the severed or broken thongs with which the big schemer's arms had been bound, at wrists and at elbows.

Meanwhile, Cephas Copeland was like one dazed, staring bewilderedly around him, now, and then muttering the name of his niece, Alda, only to find his eyes turning back to that awful shape lying there in a pool of coagulating blood, the twilight lending that ghastly face still greater horror.

Despairing of learning aught more definite through lingering there upon the stony and well-trodden plateau, Gayworthy and Go-easy Dan turned their attention elsewhere, passing down toward the trees beneath which Heber Kane had received his taste of the hangman's noose, then on to where the little spring lent moisture and freshness to the gentle slope hard by.

Here they came upon sundry signs, but the twilight was deepening rapidly, and it was not so easy to decide just when or by whom those marks had been made.

They were still engaged in puzzling over that tangled sign, when they were startled by a sharp yet quavering cry from Cephas Copeland.

Mechanically jerking out a revolver, Ten-strike Tom sprung at his best speed up the slope to the narrow plateau, where he found the old gentleman in a fever of affright, shrinking away from yet pointing toward the spot where poor Ike Dumphrey had been discovered.

"What's the matter, sir?" demanded the Man from Denver, grasping an arm and at the same time lending Copeland the support he plainly needed just then. "What have you seen or heard, man alive?"

"There! I never— Ugh!" shudderingly gasped the frightened old gentleman, as his knees doubled under him and he sunk in an unnerved heap upon the ground.

For Gayworthy no longer lent him support, but was springing toward that little fringe of trees like one who expects to find a rare prize.

"This way, Flick!" he shouted, at the same time bending over the body of the cowboy whom they had taken for granted death had claimed.

For just an instant before, a low, rattling moan had come to his ears from that very quarter, and now, as he laid eager hands upon the body, Ten-strike Tom knew that at least a spark of life was lingering there!

Spluttering with mingled excitement, rage and grief, Go-easy Dan hurriedly answered that call, and helped to lift the poor fellow out from that covert, placing him where an examination could better be made.

While that shifting was taking place, another faint moan came from those blood-crusted lips, and with rallying hopes, the King-Pin Sport bent over Dumphrey, making a hasty inspection of his hurts.

The cowboy had evidently been taken entirely off his guard, for he had been shot twice through the body from the rear.

It hardly required a second look to convince the experienced Sport that the poor fellow was mortally wounded. Indeed, hardly one man out of a thousand would ever have drawn a dozen breaths after being so shot.

"Go fetch me the flask you'll find in my little pack yonder," said Gayworthy to Flick, nodding in the direction of the ehanty. "Lively, man! It's our only show for getting at the truth of it all!"

Go-easy Dan quickly returned with the flask, and gently forcing open those now clinched teeth, Gayworthy managed to make a few drops of whisky trickle down that throat.

A faint choking, a husky gasp, then an effort at swallowing! And as those tense muscles relaxed a trifle, Ten-strike Tom sent a fair-sized swallow of the fiery liquor home.

As is so often the case where vitality has run so terribly low, the stimulant produced a marvelously rapid effect, and as those heavy lids lifted with a little flutter, Gayworthy bent over the wounded cowboy, distinctly saying:

"Who hurt you, pardner? Tell me who shot you, so I can pay him off for his dirty work, won't you?"

"An' whar's the gal done gone to?" eagerly cut in Go-easy Dan, that evidently being his greatest point of interest.

The cowboy gasped something, but he was yet too weak to speak with either distinctness or coherence.

Ten-strike Tom did not hesitate for an instant to give him more of the whisky. He knew that the poor fellow was surely doomed, and that he could not possibly live longer than an hour or two.

Such being the case, he deemed it no crime to stimulate those failing powers, even at the risk of shortening that brief lease of life. He must learn the whole truth and this seemed his sole chance for that.

Little by little Ike Dumphrey began to cast a dim light upon the subject, although he could not tell all those eagerly-listening men wished to learn.

He said they had been taken by surprise, and both Vinson and himself were shot down

from the rear, without warning, or been given the slightest opportunity of defending themselves.

He, himself, must have dropped like a stone, for he knew nothing more until all was about over. He saw Duke lying yonder in his blood, saw Heber Kane without bonds, moving about in perfect freedom, and then he saw another man—doubtless the one who had shot him down so brutally.

Given a little more whisky, the rapidly-failing cowboy managed to give a partial description of the assassin: slender, not much over the average height if at all; beardless face, or at best but a slight mustache.

This was all Dumphrey could say regarding that stranger, and fearing to press that point longer, lest other still more important facts be postponed until forever too late, Ten-strike Tom asked him what he knew about Miss Copeland.

At mention of that name, Cephas Copeland crept closer, shivering as though in a dreadful chill, yet unable to resist the awful fascination exerted over his shaken mind by that grim spectacle.

Faintly, brokenly came the answer, each labored word only too plainly showing that the cowboy was nearly at the point of death. Still the whisky kept him up, and he managed to make his meaning understood.

He had rallied a bit from what had seemed like death to him, and he caught a passing glimpse of those two men, bearing between them a muffled figure which he dimly divined must be Miss Copeland.

That was all: only the fact of her being muffled in a blanket, of her being borne away in the arms of the assassin and the villain whom he had set free from bonds.

Then the poor fellow began to sink rapidly, and though the two men did all they knew how to prolong that life, all their efforts were in vain.

Dumphrey was bleeding inwardly, as he must have been all those long hours, and now he was past swallowing, hence the whisky could no longer be called into use.

And then, with a long, slow sigh, life passed away forever!

Thomas Gayworthy rose to his feet, lifting a clinched hand as he said:

"A good lad gone! I'll avenge him, or lose my own life trying!"

CHAPTER XXV.

A HARD HEART BEGINS TO SOFTEN.

WHEN fully convinced that death had claimed its second victim, Ten-strike Tom and Go-easy Dan carried the bodies into the cabin, where they would be better protected until there was time to attend to them more properly.

While they were thus occupied, Cephas Copeland rallied in part from the terrible shock which he had received, looking and acting far more like his ordinary self, save that he seemed to give more thought to the safety of Alda than to her supposed sin against himself.

In husky tones he begged Gayworthy to find the poor girl, to rescue her from those lawless villains before still worse should befall her!

The King-Pin Sport paid him comparatively scant notice, just then, for his whole mind was bent on solving the bloody mystery, and in order to do that, the indistinct sign must be studied until the correct interpretation was found.

Giving the cabin interior a closer examination to satisfy themselves that nothing there could cast any additional light upon the matter, the two men once more left the little plateau for the ground below.

By this time it was so dark that unaided eyesight proved of little avail, and Go-easy Dan set to work preparing lights by which to study such sign as might be found.

Ten-strike Tom assured himself that the horses were gone, the buckskin gelding which had played so prominent a part in the affair, as well as the animals which had belonged to Dumphrey and Vinson.

This fact lent him no little encouragement, since he knew he could pick that particular track out from any number of other hoof-

marks, and so he assured Go-easy Dan when that worthy came up with his lights.

"It'll not be such a terrible task, then, provided they're fools enough to keep the buckskin with them," added Gayworthy, while pointing out those especial tracks to the mountain vagabond. "But—will they do that? Surely Heber Kane hasn't forgotten what I told him about my taking such particular pains to spot his nag's tracks?"

"Waal, it'll help us out fur's it goes, any-way," grimly said Flick, as he fell to studying the sign, here a confused maze. "An' ef that don't cl'ar up a mighty sight better'n she am right hyar, that won't be so turrible much, nuther!"

Neither man paid much attention to Cephas Copeland, only at times gruffly ordering him to keep away as his eagerness led him close enough to interfere with their trail-hunting.

First making it tolerably clear that the assassins had really taken to horse with their fair captive, the two scouts left that tangle of tracks, cutting ahead to strike a less intricate study.

Ten-strike Tom was the fortunate finder, and after his whistle had brought Go-easy Dan to the spot, the veteran bent low and slowly lifted the trail for a few rods, seemingly studying each separate track as though his very life depended upon his thoroughness.

At the end of that time, however, Flick rose erect, brushing the sweat from brows with his greasy sleeve, speaking in his usual tones:

"Easy, go easy, gentlemen! Hyar we be, an' thar's the trail! Ef it hain't jest so plain es the nose on a clerpunt's face, I've tackled them es was heap sight blinder!"

"Then you really think—"

"Go easy, boss! 'Tain't so mighty much thinkin' es it is knowin'. I kin foller that trail from cend to cend, jest so you give me time enough. But—how 'bout the young leddy, boss?"

Ten-strike Tom gave a quick start at that significant question. The mountain vagabond shook his head grimly as those black eyes met his, adding, slowly:

"Thar's the plum' wu'st of it all, boss! She's in the grup of devils—plum' devils, fer shore!"

Gayworthy made a passionate gesture at that, his face turning far paler than ordinary, while his eyes seemed backed by living fire.

"Devils, sure enough! But—I'll send 'em to the devil's home if any material harm comes to Miss Copeland through them! I swear it, by my love for the little woman waiting for me, at home!"

Cephas Copeland sunk to the ground in a shivering heap as he listened to these terrifying hints. More plainly than ever was he beginning to realize how dear to his old heart was the maiden whom his unjust treatment had at last driven to rebellion.

Neither of the other men seemed to heed the old man's distress, all their cares turning toward that imperiled girl. And once more the Man from Denver gave his grim vow to exact full vengeance for any harm that should befall Alda Copeland.

Go-easy Dan nodded his full assent to that oath, but then drily added a word or two:

"That's all right fer us, boss, but how fer her? I'd a mighty sight rather let 'em all both go foot-free an' neck-safe, jest so we mought pull the little leddy out safe an' sound—so I jest would, now!"

At this earnest declaration, Cephas Copeland plucked up strength and courage sufficient to send him to the front, and clinging to Gayworthy's arm with nervous hands, he huskily spoke:

"Save her—save her, above all else, sir! Never mind the rest; I'd sooner lose ten times as much, rather than have harm come to— She is my own niece—the child of my own brother, sir!"

Ten-strike Tom made as though he would shake off that trembling clutch, his brows gathering darkly; but as he looked down upon that now grief-marked face, his harsh dislike began to soften.

"You fairly drove her away, Mr. Copeland! You tried to take out her heart and replace it with a stone! Her brother was—"

"I know—I begin to see it all, now!" huskily murmured the old man, lips quiver-

ing and eyes filling with an unusual moisture. "I was in the wrong, but—Satan tempted me, and I fell!"

"Waal, I'll be dug-gun!" slowly ejaculated Go-easy Dan, as he stood staring at the agitated speaker. "Ef he hain't a-leakin' out o' the two eyes o' him, then I wouldn't say so!"

If Cephas Copeland heard, he surely did not heed. Still clinging to that strong arm, he urged his plea:

"Oh, sir, say that you will find Alda and fetch her back to me! Say that my mad folly hasn't driven her to—to her—death!"

His voice grew choked, but that awful word came forth almost as a shriek. He flung up his hands, then clasped them over his eyes, staggering like a drunken man.

He would have fallen over the stones only for the swift support lent him by the Man from Denver, who gently lowered him to a seat on a friendly boulder hard by.

Begging him to rally his powers, and giving earnest assurance that nothing in their power should be omitted to rescue the maiden, Ten-strike Tom once more fell to work over that trail, both he and Go-easy Dan chafing fiercely against the slow progress made.

They had the darkness to contend with, and there was just sufficient breeze to make their lights flare and flicker, thus rendering the task of lifting a trail over difficult ground so much the more heavy.

After more than another hour had been spent in this manner, the result being a gain in distance of less than half a mile, Go-easy Dan slowly straightened his bent back, looking into the face of the Man from Denver as he spoke:

"I say, boss!"

"Well, what is it now?"

"We kin keep on jest like this, you see, boss, an' mebbe make es fur by daylight es them hellhoun's hes made in a weenty hour! Ef we do, how long do you reckon 'twould take fer us to ketch up?"

"You've got more back of that, old man; out with it!" impatiently said the King-Pin Sport.

"Waal, what's the matter with roustin' out the hull dug-gun range? Why can't we stir 'em all up, an' so kiver fifty mile to our one? Some o' the gang mought run up on the cusses, an' so—"

"You're right, and I was an infernal blunderhead for not thinking of it before!" cried Gayworthy, then giving a quick look toward the old man as he added: "Her brother and young Whittaker certainly ought to be notified at once, but—"

"Oh, sir, if they only might!" huskily exclaimed Mr. Copeland. "If Philo was only here! But of course that can't be! And yet—"

In a few words as possible Gayworthy explained the situation to the bewildered old gentleman, and as soon as he could realize that wonderful fact, Copeland begged them to lose no further time in seeking aid from the McCoy Ranch.

"We kin save heap o' time in the cend by roustin' o' 'em all out, too," cheerfully affirmed the mountain vagabond as he struck out at a brisk pace toward the distant C. Bar Ranch, with Cephas Copeland mounted upon the black horse, as being the weakest of the party.

"McCoy'll turn out with his gang o' cowboys, an' by stringin' 'em out, like, we kin hit off the trail miles ahead o' whar we'd be ef we'd stuck all night to the glimmer-huntin'—see?"

"We'll try to think that way," said the Man from Denver, although he was less confident than his companion. "At all events, it seems to be about the best plan we can follow, right now."

In order to make quicker time, Go-easy Dan coaxed Gayworthy to "hop up abind the ole gent" on more than one occasion, where the nature of the ground permitted a double burden. As for himself, the tough old coot seemed tireless as though his sinews were made of finely-tempered steel.

Thus fairly rapid progress was made, and long before the hour for break of day was due, Go-easy Dan breasted the last heavy slope, from the crest of which their first distant view of the McCoy Ranch might be won.

As he topped that ridge, a sharp cry broke from his lips.

"Go easy, lads! Somethin's bu'sted loose at the C. Bar, or I'm a liar!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

DEATH WITHIN AND DEATH WITHOUT.

THE ugly glow of burning powder came from out the gloom at no very great distance, and the night air was split by the rattling explosion of heavily charged firearms.

Jack Hogan plunged heavily forward across the threshold of the storehouse which he had just opened, and after that horrible screech of agony, he cried out in hoarse tones:

"Save me—don't leave me to—"

"Surrender, there!" thundered the voice of Big Art McCoy, coming from the direction of the main building. "Take 'em, lads!"

One swift look which told him attempted flight could only end in death or recapture, then Jay Whittaker sharply cried out to his friend:

"Jump inside, Philo! For your life, man, jump inside the door!"

Another irregular volley came from the gloom, mingling with shouts and yells, and as young Copeland almost involuntarily obeyed the stern command of his companion in peril, Whittaker stooped and grasped the fallen cowboy, almost throwing him inside the door, which he then caught hold of and flung shut on the impulse of the moment.

That cast the interior into almost utter darkness, but one hand struck against a heavy iron bracket which was plainly intended to hold a bar of iron or wood, and given that as a hint, Whittaker was enabled to fasten the door just in time to keep it from being dashed open in his very face.

The excited cowboys came with a rush, urged on by their master, Big Art McCoy, some shooting by the barrier, others turning shoulders that way to fill the lack of a more substantial battering-ram; but the barrier resisted all their efforts, thanks to the fortunate discovery made in the very nick of time by Whittaker.

"Take 'em, boys!" repeated the far-reaching voice of the ranch-owner. "Take 'em, dead or alive!"

All this stung Jay Whittaker to something like equal fury, and as the cowboys recoiled from that first fruitless assault upon the door, he cried out in stern tones:

"Fair warning, all of you devils! Go a little slow, out there, or we'll take our turn; and if we're forced to shoot, we'll shoot to kill!"

A brief silence followed this stern warning, as though the enemy were slightly at a loss just what answer to make or action to take.

But then the stentorian tones of Arthur McCoy made themselves heard in reply:

"That's all right, maybe, but if you do shoot, you can take your choice between death by bullet or by rope! For I'll wipe you out as I would mash the head of a rattler under my heel!"

"We've had a sample of your style of justice, already!"

"And proved it a mistaken mildness when you ran away from the test I generously proposed, you horse-thieves!"

"The man who dares to call us that is a liar!" hotly retorted Philo Copeland. "'We're no more horse-thieves than you are—if so much!'"

"Then why risk your lives by making a sneak of it, like this?" came the fierce, sneering retort. "All you had to do was to wait in peace for your justification, if you were innocent. Instead—"

"You gave us lots of encouragement to make that same waiting game, didn't you?" hotly cried out Whittaker. "You trapped us like rats! You bound us, caged us in a hole not fit to harbor a hog! You swore that we should hang unless—Bah! Better death fighting like a white man, than wait for such mercy as you and your fellow cut-throats would show a couple of helpless strangers!"

Another brief silence followed this speech, broken as before by the voice of the giant ranchman:

"We've wasted enough breath in idle chatter, and now—business! Open that door; come forth and surrender quietly, or I swear by all that's good and bad I'll carry the house

by storm, and if you're both wiped out in the racket, so much the worse for you!"

"And here's a final word back for you!" defiantly answered Whittaker. "You've begun the fight. You've already killed one man, and that surely entitles us to shoot back. So—guard your own lives, you curs!"

As though startled by threat or by words, there came no instant reply, nor was the fierce assault upon the barred door immediately resumed, as the defenders of the storehouse fully expected.

Then, in altered tones came the query from Big Art McCoy:

"Are you lying, or in earnest? Whom have we killed, as you say?"

Now it was the turn of Whittaker to hesitate, for he was reluctant to expose the poor fellow who had redeemed his pledge, even at the cost of his life.

"Out with it, you fool!" thundered the giant ranch-owner, plainly thinking that declaration but a ruse to win a brief reprieve. "Who is it we've killed? Give his name, else—"

The demanded answer came after a fashion, which surprised the defenders fully as much as it could those on the outside.

As though the dead had come back to life, Jack Hogan hoarsely cried out from the spot to which he had been cast as a corpse by the danger-nerved arms of Whittaker:

"Back, boss! Keep yer distance, I warn ye! You've got me, but I've got—I've got powder 'nough right hyar to blow—Keep back, or we fly up to glory all in a heap!"

Startled cries came from just outside the door, followed by the rush of hurried feet, plainly showing how effective that threat was!

And then the ranch-owner cried out, harshly:

"Hold, you fool! There's enough powder in yonder to blow the C. Bar clean out of existence!"

A shrill, wild laugh came from the lips of the wounded cowboy at this, and then he shouted in his turn:

"It's my turn now, boss! I've bin your houn'-dog fer nigh ten years, an' you've paid me off by shootin' me all full o' holes! But now—"

"Who is it talking like that? Surely not you, Jack Hogan?"

"You're a liar when you say so, Art McCoy! An' that does me heap sight mo' good then anything else I kin think off!" fiercely cried the poor fellow, whom Whittaker could just make out as he half-lay, half-crouched over a little stack of—What could it be?

This time he could no longer doubt the identity of the speaker, and McCoy sharply ordered his fellows to fall back to a safe distance from the store-building.

At the same time Jay Whittaker stole noiselessly toward that bent figure, then caught his breath with a choking gasp as he saw what the wounded cowboy was doing: screwing the lead caps off those iron powder-kegs, preparatory to putting his wild threats into full execution!

"Quick! lend a hand, Philo!" hoarsely muttered Whittaker, as he leaped forward and caught Hogan around both arms and body, jerking him back as swiftly as possible.

But the poor fellow was almost past making any resistance, it proved, and placing him in as easy a position as might be, Whittaker tried to ascertain the extent of his injuries, although the lack of a light rendered that a difficult task.

Still, he learned sufficient to convince him death was but a matter of time; that poor Hogan would never live to see the sun rise!

He had scarcely come to this conclusion when another summons came to them from the giant ranch-owner, and answering that call, Whittaker received a last grim warning in the words that follow:

"There's no use in your even trying to kick, strangers. We've got you safely corralled in yonder, and you can't get out without our consent. Or, if you should be wild enough to try a break, you can't take a second step on the outside without getting filled with lead!"

"Can you come in any easier than we can get out?" retorted Jay.

"Perhaps not, but that doesn't touch the point. I'm trying to make you listen to

sober sense, young fellow, and here it comes again.

"If you fire a single shot from there; if you draw so much as a single drop of blood from any one of my party; I swear by all mankind holds holy that I'll hang you like a couple of sheep-killing curs!"

Isn't it catching before hanging, though?" mocked Philo Copeland, his mouth at a loophole which he had searched for and found, much to his own satisfaction, as he handled the revolver given him by Jack Hogan.

"We've got you cornered, and as you haven't provisions—"

"You're a liar!" again cut in the younger defender recklessly. "All about us lie provisions. If they are good enough for your men, I reckon we can keep from starving by doing a little nibbling!"

"You may make out as to grub, then, but how about drink? But what's the use in talking about what can't come to pass? You're not all fools! You know already that we hold you entirely at our mercy. So—listen!"

"Do as I have already said: open up, come forth, yield yourselves to a force which you can't even hope to stand off, and then—"

"Climb a tree at the end of a rope!" sternly finished Jay Whittaker, letting his passions get the upper hand once more. "Never that, you hell-hound! You may kill us in the end, but we'll die as honest white men should go under—fighting to the last, and making our teeth meet at every bite!"

Arthur McCoy did not speak again for several minutes, all remaining silent outside the store house.

Naturally suspecting fresh peril through this, the two men tried all they knew to catch at least a glimpse of their enemy before the last dread shock should come; and so absorbed were they in this effort that they lost thought of the dying cowboy.

For some little time Jack Hogan had been muttering and talking in low, broken tones, but now he seemed to gather fresh strength and crept back to those ready powder-kegs, where he struck a match as he lifted his voice:

"Git ready, boss, fer hyar we go to heaven 'all in a heap!" he cried, and Whittaker gave a yell of fierce dismay as he saw that match thrust fairly into the powder!

CHAPTER XXVII.

NUMBERING THEIR MINUTES.

JAY WHITTAKER saw that match flame up as the crazed cowboy uttered his fierce challenge to the enemy outside, and he saw Hogan was on the very point of thrusting the flickering torch into the mass of powder he had emptied out of one of those iron kegs!

All this he took in at a single glance, yet to him it seemed almost an age, knowing as he did what utter annihilation must follow an explosion.

For the fraction of a second it seemed to him that he must seek safety in flight; but then, with a shrill scream of warning, he leaped forward upon the insane cowboy, making a swift grasp at that match, his fingers closing over it just as it touched the deadly grains!

The light was extinguished, although that hand likewise held a quantity of powder as well, and it seemed a miracle that an explosion did not follow, after all.

As he clutched at the match with one hand, Whittaker used its mate to strike the madman aside, fairly hurling him into the arms of Philo Copeland, who had acted only a trifle less promptly.

"Don't—He's crazy!" panted Whittaker, recoiling from that dangerous vicinity, holding his hand high and clinching his fingers until it seemed as though bones would break and flesh turn to pulp.

Copeland staggered and fell with his charge, but that came through his foot slipping upon a nail, not because poor Hogan offered any resistance.

His wild attempt to execute his threat to blow all into eternity together, was but the final flicker of the wick as it fell into the socket; only for Jay Whittaker that threat would have become a reality, but he who put it into execution would hardly have realized as much.

During those few seconds of awful suspense, neither one of the store-house defenders took heed of what might be taking place outside of those walls, but the dying threat made by Jack Hogan had reached all ears, and as it had before, sent all away in frantic flight.

The ranch-owner himself alone appeared to be more angry than scared. He must have recognized that voice at last, for now came in harsh, stern speech, threatening one who was forever past fearing his authority.

"Steady there, Jack Hogan! I'll strip your hide and hang it on the fence as buzzard-bait unless you play white again! Bring those hot-headed fools to Limerick, or I'll take pay for all out of your bones!"

There was no immediate answer given to this fierce call, for Whittaker, having satisfied himself that the match was actually extinguished without setting aught afire, turned to where those two men lay, and then made sure that the poor cowboy would never make such another attempt.

Jack Hogan was alive, but that was all. His face was wet with the death-damp, and the death-rattle was in his throat.

Philo Copeland quickly rallied from that clumsy tumble, and seeing that matters were going on fairly, hastily muttered:

"Shall I tie him, Jay? Do you reckon there's need for that?"

"Not now, poor devil!" came the subdued reply. "He's going—he didn't really know what he was trying to do, just now!"

Both young men felt that they were in the presence of death, and for those few seconds they seemed to forget what peril still menaced their lives.

Again there came a stern summons from without, and Whittaker turned toward that quarter with a little start and catching of his breath.

Again did Big Art McCoy call upon Jack Hogan to make amends for his recent treachery by throwing open those defenses, saying that a refusal on his part should be terribly punished.

Whittaker listened, then called back in clear, stern tones:

"Jack Hogan is beyond your power, Mr. McCoy! Your bloodhounds filled him full of lead when they opened fire without so much as a word of warning; and now—"

"Dead, do you mean?"

"He is dying this minute, and—of your lead, remember!"

A brief silence, then back came the stern response:

"If you are telling the simple truth, stranger, then all I've got to say is just this: served him mighty right! He was playing traitor to his sworn duty, and that—"

"Say, rather, that he lost his life while trying to undo your foul work!" sternly retorted Jay Whittaker. "If that constitutes a traitor, then poor Hogan can better afford to wear the title than you to give it, Arthur McCoy!"

"He must have set you free, and—what were you but thieves, caught in the very act of breaking into a house where naught save my property was to be found?"

"That's still another lie to score against you!" cried Whittaker, in no sense at a loss for words, just then. "We came here to take possession of the property you stole from us: our weapons, and our horse-furniture. We would have gone our way without harm or loss to yourself, only for—"

He cut his speech short at that, for just then a low, unsteady word from Philo Copeland told him all was over so far as Jack Hogan was concerned.

"He's gone—dead, poor fellow!"

Whittaker left his post at the loophole to cross over and bend at the side of that body. Body it was, now, for the vital spark had fled forever!

When fully assured that this was indeed death, not another stupor like that which had so nearly ended in their own destruction, the young man returned to his post, sternly calling forth:

"You can count your coup now, Mr. McCoy. Poor Hogan is dead, and my worst wish is that you'll have to meet his charges at the bar of judgment, when the last trump sounds!"

For some minutes silence reigned without a stir, and then, as if by magic, the alert though the body was dead, not so much

as a passing glimpse could they catch of their enemy.

But then again sounded the deep tones of Giant McCoy.

"For the last time of asking, gentlemen, will you act sensibly and take your chances of winning clear, rather than die the death of cornered rats caught in their holes? Come! You're hardly such idiots as your actions so far would seem to prove. You surely know—"

"How to measure the worth of your promises!" cried out Philo Copeland, impatiently. "Bah, you overgrown hound! If we were idiots enough to meekly yield at your call, what next? Death, just as surely and ten-fold more frightful than that which yourimps of Satan bestowed upon poor Jack Hogan, here!"

"Death will surely be your portion if you refuse to yield, anyway!"

"That may all be, but one other thing is equally as certain," retorted Jay Whittaker. "If we're marked for death, be sure we'll die like white men, and that means fighting!"

"Bah! What show will you stand, if it comes to that? I've got just a dozen good men for each one of you, without counting myself!"

"You'll have a few loss knaves to answer at next roll-call, then," retorted Philo, with a short, reckless laugh. "Since you seem to consider it all over but the killing, McCoy, will you do me a vast favor?"

"What do you mean, anyway?"

"Give me one fair whack at your beautiful self, and I really think I could die happy!"

A fierce oath answered this mocking gibe, and after a brief pause the head of the C. Bar Ranch spoke again:

"I hadn't ought to waste further breath upon such bull-headed rascals as you've proved yourselves to be, but—here's my very last warning, so make the most of it."

"I'll give you just one hour in which to make up your minds. If you decide to surrender without any further racket, I pledge my honor to hold you in perfect safety until your guilt or innocence can be proven."

"If you can't or won't accept this offer, then—look out! I'll set fire to that building on every side, and roast you like rats!"

With that fierce menace the deep-toned voice died away, leaving the besieged to count their remaining minutes of life.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

AN ANGEL-FACED DESPERADO.

CROUCHING there among the rocks which overhung the little spring, one hand fumbling with his Winchester, the other holding a leafy bough of that scraggy tree close over his head, and face, he who only a little later was to leave such ghastly sign for Ten-strike Tom and Go-easy Dan to puzzle their brains over, waited and watched for the chance which an inscrutable fate soon flung in his way.

Alda Copeland was inside the little log-cabin. Heber Kane was yet seated upon yonder boulder, just as the Man from Denver had left him to go in search of the lost diamonds with Dan Flick.

The two cowboys had been taking life easy, sprawling on the rocks as they lazily smoked their pipes while standing guard; but only Duke Vincent was where those evil eyes could fully cover him.

Ike Dumphrey lay but a few feet distant, yet a portion of that rocky point masked his head and shoulders from the aim of the assassin, and he dared not risk a shot at that body alone.

But then poor Dumphrey gave a lazy yawn as his burnt-out ashes refused to respond with smoke to his match, and rising to his feet he passed over to where his mate was lounging, asking for a fresh pipeful of tobacco.

It was while the doomed cowboys were thus engaged that the assassin fired his first shot, sending the heavy slug straight through the brain of the taller cowboy, then shooting Dumphrey as he sprung to his feet with a yell of angry surprise.

Dumphrey flung up his arms and staggered forward at that shot, but before he could fall yet another death-missile was hurled at him, sending the poor fellow down in a quivering heap, only a few yards

away from where his partner was lying in death!

"Steady, Kane!" shrilly cried the assassin, as the bound ruffian jumped to his feet in horrified alarm. "It's only—Steady, you fool!"

With a catlike bound the murderer sprung from covert to the little plateau, recovering his balance with marvelous celerity, then rushing directly for the door of the mountain shack.

For there, roused by those rapid shots and the horrible death-cry which poor Ike Dumphrey gave as he fell like a log, stood Alda Copeland, looking like one more than half dazed with mingled fear and surprise.

The assassin dropped his rifle as he made that swift rush, and before the maiden could fully realize her peril, his sinewy arms were around her, his right hand viciously clutching her throat the more surely to smother her screams for assistance.

"Quiet, you little fool!" he hissingly cried, as he overcame the mad struggles of the frightened girl. "There's no harm coming your way, unless you invite it by your own folly. Quiet, I tell you!"

By this time Heber Kane had fully recognized the assassin, and now came hurrying that way, fairly spluttering in his intense excitement:

"It's you, Tyndall? What brought you

"Button that long lip, can't you?" harshly interposed the other villain, giving the struggling maiden a vicious jerk and twist which made her helpless though now held by but a single arm. "Steady, until I can cut—Sol!"

A few deft strokes with his keen-edged knife caused the bonds to drop from Heber Kane's arms, and then, as he quickly regained the full use of those members, the released prisoner assisted in binding and blindfolding Alda Copeland.

More than once while that was being done, Heber Kane checked his companion and hindered him from still further insulting their captive; yet one who saw the two men together would surely have marked Kane as the viler ruffian.

Marsh Tyndall was one of those rare abortions of human nature; a man of almost angelic beauty of face, yet born without a heart, without the shadow of a conscience.

The description given later on by poor Ike Dumphrey failed to do him justice in an outward respect, though it was fairly accurate as to size and figure.

Slender, with an almost womanish figure, thanks to the small, round waist, the swelling hips and full bosom, Marsh Tyndall might easily have passed for a woman in fitting garb, only for the silken black mustaches which shadowed his upper lip. And even they could almost be matched by the jetty down worn by more than one southern beauty.

It was not until after Alda Copeland was effectually hampered that either man said aught concerning the future; but then Marsh Tyndall, in a few brief sentences, told how he had chanced to discover the arrest of his partner in the Hobgoblin Mine, and how he had skulked around that vicinity until his opportunity for making a double came his way.

"And now we've got the bull right by the tail!" he declared, with grim exultation. "So long as we can keep this beauty in our grip, just so certainly can we dictate our terms to old Copeland!"

But Heber Kane evidently felt far less confident as to that, although he had once acted upon the same belief. He said as much, and warned the younger partner that they would only be adding fresh weight to the already heavy evidence against them by keeping hold of the maiden.

Marsh Tyndall flatly declined to argue the point, but bade Heber Kane arm himself from the supply provided by that double murder; and when this was done, they carried poor Alda away from the cabin, down past the little spring to where the horses were tethered.

Tyndall had taken a hasty look at his victims, pronouncing them "cold meat" with a brutal carelessness which sent a cold shiver over his partner; but scarcely had the sounds of their hoofstrokes upon the stony ground

died away before Ike Dumphrey slowly, painfully dragged himself over to the shelter where he was found by the Man from Denver and Go-easy Dan, later on.

The two ruffians rode at a rapid rate until they had placed several miles of space between themselves and the scene of bloodshed, then Marsh Tyndall called a halt for the purpose of deciding upon their wisest and safest course for the future.

Heber Kane seemed almost completely broken down in nerve by all that had transpired, and shivered perceptibly as he crouched down near the horses, now and then flashing a frightened glance around them like one who feels a richly deserved retribution is drawing nigh.

"The game's played out, I tell you, Marsh!" he cried, after Tyndall had once more dwelt upon the strong hold they would have over Cephas Copeland in the possession of their present captive.

"Only the first half of it, Kane, and we're even on the score, thanks to this last little coup of mine!" quickly asserted the younger knave. "And if we play our remaining cards correctly—we can't lose, man!"

"We can't help but lose!" persisted Kane, shivering still. "If you knew that infernal Ten-strike Tom as well as I've come to know him since we held up the stage, you wouldn't—He's the devil himself, I tell you, pardner!"

"We'll send him home to Satan, his master, then!" grimly declared the angel-faced desperado, tapping the ivory-handled revolver resting against his hip. "After all, he's only one man, and so long as we pull together, you and I, we're good for a dozen such fellows!"

"You're wrong—dead wrong, Marsh! He's too heavy for either—too much for both of us, for that matter!"

"Where's your nerve gone to, man alive? Come, get a brace on, or—"

"It's gone where your nerve'll go, boy, if ever you come to buck up against that human devil!" cried the big fellow, rising to his feet with a passionate gesture. "It was bad enough when I was back yonder, arms tied and under guard; but now—if you hadn't chipped in so terribly, Tyndall!"

"What else could I do, you fool?" retorted the other schemer. "Was I to turn tail and leave you in limbo, then?"

"Yes! I'd rather that than—Come, Marsh," his tones turning husky once more, as he glanced apprehensively around them. "There's only one thing left for us, and that is skip the country while we can! I'm done—"

"You will be done, unless—Steady, you cur!" cried Tyndall, thrusting a cocked revolver fairly into the big fellow's face.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE DESPERADO'S DARING SCHEME.

HEBER KANE recoiled a bit from that vicious gesture, but Tyndall followed him up with the weapon, fairly rubbing the cold muzzle against the big fellow's nose, his blue eyes flashing as though they had caught and imprisoned the full rays of the noonday sun.

"Don't—don't shoot, pardner!" begged Kane, looking and acting like one wholly cowed.

"Swear that you'll see me through—swear that you'll back me up in this little game as a true pard should—or I'll lift your roof right now, and play a lone hand for the Hobgoblin!"

Clear and distinct came those words, no one emphasized more than another, but those blazing eyes and that cruel smile told only too plainly how little the speaker would balk at putting his deadly threat into full execution.

Better than most men Heber Kane realized all this, and sworn mates though they had long been, he knew that, if whim or fancy caught him, Marsh Tyndall would blow out his brains with as little compunction as he had shown over assassinating the two cowboys.

"Quick, old man!" came the impatient warning as that ugly weapon lightly tapped against his bearded lips. "Take your choice: life as a white man, or death as a cowardly cur!"

"Don't—I'll agree!" muttered the big fellow, now most thoroughly cowed. "Put up your gun, Marsh, and—"

"All right, my hearty!" with a short, meaning laugh as he stepped back out of reach of those massive arms. "I'll put up my gun, Heber, but if you make me draw it again by your infernal kicking—well, you'll only kick once more, for I'll shoot first and argue after!"

Heber Kane made a reckless gesture, yet hardly one at which his vicious companion could take offense.

"What matter?" he muttered, in a tone of sullen despondency. "It's clear devil's luck, and I'll end at the gallows! Have it your way, Marsh; I don't know as you can make matters any worse than they are now!"

Tyndall laughed recklessly, a spice of the Evil One showing itself in that angelic-seeming face just then.

"In for a lamb, in for a sheep, pardner! All I've done is to send a couple of worthless bull-whackers across the range, and, if anything, I deserve thanks for such a service to humanity!"

"We'll get those thanks—through the loop of a lariat!"

"Shall I stiffen your backbone up a trifle more, pardner?" asked Tyndall, tapping the butt of a revolver.

Kane shook his head with a sickly grin, as he seated himself on a stone hard by.

"Never mind trying it, Marsh. Once kissing your gun is plenty, and trying it twice might end differently. Better tell just what it is you expect of me, I reckon."

"To show up a true pard, for a starter," retorted the murderer, giving a glance toward where Alda was lying with back supported by a bowlder, either unconscious or else too sadly shaken for making her captors trouble just then.

"I was that when I advised a skip-out in a hurry," grimly muttered the big ruffian, flashing a look toward that more than handsome face. "But you wouldn't have it that way, and now—"

"Twas the way of a craven, and no man living has any right to call me that!" viciously cut in the smaller villain. "I'm in this game to stay, win or lose, and you've got to back me up from now on to the end, old fellow!"

"That end will have a noose tied in it, too!"

"Twill be for your neck, then, never for mine! I may go down in defeat, but I'll fall fighting like a man, not whining like a cur!"

Kane shook his head moodily at that, but made no reply. He knew that nothing he might say could shake Marsh Tyndall's resolution when once fairly set; so he held his peace for the time being.

Tyndall waited a minute or two, as though inviting further opposition, but as none came, he spoke again, in more placable tones:

"We've gone too far for holding back, or anything like that, pardner. We've got to win out in a straight, or else throw up our hands and get ready to croak! But that's not my way of doing business!"

"We slipped up on getting hold of the papers, thanks to that devil of a Ten-strike Tom; but now, we've got what the old fellow holds far more precious: and that's his girl, yonder!"

Kane gave a low sound which might be either curse, groan or disgusted grunt, but said nothing in words.

"That's all right, pardner; you fail to just see it now, but my eyes are better than yours, and they can see a dead-sure winning not far ahead! And right this is the way we'll work the little racket:

"We'll take the girl to a snug place of hiding; I've got one right in sight this minute! We'll keep her under cover until we can drive a bargain with old Copeland. When he knows that it's either come to our terms or an eternal good-by to his niece—well, he can only give us one sort of answer!"

"I wish I could be as sure of that as you 'pear to feel!" despondently muttered Kane, shaking his head. "I know I used to reason the same way, and that's why I tried to run her off; but now—"

"But now you've lost your sand, and can't do anything better than play croaker!" impatiently assumed his comrade. "You've got to get a brace on, old man, or you and I will fall to clapperclawing, sure!"

Heber made no answer to this thinly disguised threat, and in a few moments more Tyndall spoke again:

"That's all settled then! We'll hurry on to the snug retreat I told you of, and after resting up a bit we'll open the campaign. We'll look up old Copeland and make him our offer, when—"

"When we'll pull hemp, dead sure!"

"I never will; you can lay your life on that, pardner! But, since you are so badly scared—listen!"

"You can stay behind as guard for the girl, and I'll do all the rest; I'll look up Copeland, make our ultimatum known, close the bargain and all! After that we'll get our own price for the Hobgoblin, and then rack out for fresh and safer pastures!"

"How do you like the peppergram, pardner?"

"I've told you that already, so where's the use? The devil's got us both branded, and he'll put in his claims all right, of course!" moodily answered the big villain, rising from his seat and shaking himself like one vainly trying to cast aside an evil foreboding.

With a sneer at the unmanly fears which had so changed his partner, Marsh Tyndall replaced their captive upon the horse set aside for her riding, then their flight was resumed.

Evidently Tyndall was making for some definite point, for he seemed never at a loss which crook to avoid, which turn to take, picking their way through bad ground and over fair, all the time heading toward that particular point.

The sun had set hours before, and the night was growing old before Marsh Tyndall gave signs of calling a halt, though Kane had been chafing against fatigue for some little time. But now the little desperado drew rein with a long breath, speaking as he did so:

"Here we are at last, please the pigs!"

"Time enough, too!" growlingly observed Kane.

"That's all right, pardner; but you just keep your tongue between your teeth, please! Now, look to the girl while I skip on ahead to make sure there's no snags lying in the way!"

And Tyndall, slipping out of his saddle, hurried off through the night, quickly vanishing from the uneasy gaze of his comrade in evil.

Poor Alda was drooping in her saddle, worn out by that long journey and her sore trials combined; but, presently, there came the sound of returning footsteps, and then Marsh Tyndall called out, exultantly:

"It's all right, Kane! We can lie low in yonder until— What in Hades is that? Who come? Speak, or I'll fight, you cur—ah!"

The little desperado jerked out his guns and opened fire at those charging shadows, only to stagger and fall, with a savage screech!

CHAPTER XXX.

PLUCKED FROM THE FLAMES.

AN instant later Ten-strike Tom and Cephas Copeland came to where Go-easy Dan was standing, and they too caught sight of the distant spectacle which had drawn that startled cry from the lips of the mountain vagabond.

From those far-distant buildings marking the location of Big Art McCoy's noted C. Bar Ranch, there came a dull red glow as of fire, which was growing larger and brighter as they looked. And from the same point now came the significant rattle of firearms!

That one keen look, as though to put it past doubting just where the red beacon was glowing, then Dan Flick again exploded, with:

"Go easy, thar! Look an' hear to all them, will ye? The lads is in heap trouble, now I'm a-tellin' of ye, gents! In a monstrous mighty big heap sight o' trouble—jest so!"

"Do you really think it's the C. Bar Ranch?" asked Gayworthy.

"Don't I jest know she am? An' the boys—easy, go easy, dug-gun ye, McCoy!" spluttered the veteran, fairly dancing as he shook a bony fist toward that ruddy beacon.

"Philo! If harm comes to him— Save the poor boy, gentlemen!" Mr. Copeland quaveringly begged, clinging to the saddle-bow

as though that grip alone kept him from falling to earth. "Save him! If harm comes to him through— Oh, heavens! I feel like a murderer already!"

"Durn so much chin-music!" cried Flick, trailing his long rifle and starting toward the distant ranch at top speed, calling back over his shoulder: "Double up, you critters! We got to git thar—got to git thar in a monstrous hurry ef we reckon to— Do yer duty, laigs!"

With so good an example set for them, there was nothing to do but to copy it; and with a warning word to Copeland to steady himself, Ten-strike Tom nimbly sprang to the croup behind him and sent the good black steed off in a gallop along the track of Go-easy Dan.

That blaze was mounting higher and showing still more plainly. And, even so far away, the keen-eyed Man from Denver fancied he could catch fleeting glimpses of human shapes near that fire, which helped account for the straggling shots which could be heard.

Go easy Dan set the pace for the others; and, although he had but two legs against four, the old fellow gallantly held his own in that mad race through the night, leading from start to finish, and still having breath enough to announce his coming to Big Art McCoy and the cowboys of the C. Bar Ranch.

"Easy, go easy, dug-gun ye fer cussed lunkheads!" the old tramp fairly howled, as he rushed around that huge corral and came into full sight of the blazing building. "Whar's Big Art? Whar's the boys which— Oh, cuss ye fer 'tarnal fools!"

At that rush—for the doubly-laden horse was close behind the mountain tramp, and its clattering hoofs, added to that wild protest, drew nearly all eyes in that direction—more than one Winchester was turned toward the spluttering speaker, and only for the ruddy glow which enabled the giant ranchman to recognize him, Go-easy Dan Flick might well have paid a sore penalty for his impetuosity.

"Hold your fire, boys!" thundered McCoy as he sprang between with hands flung up in warning. "It's a friend! It's— What's the matter with you, Go-easy? And—who're those following?"

"Friends, unless you've done harm to our friends, sir!" quickly answered the Man from Denver, checking his steed as he spoke. "Where are they? Copeland and Whittaker!"

"What are they to you? And, for that matter, who are you, anyway?"

"They're clean white, Big Art, an' so be the lads which— Ef you've done 'em dirty dirt, though, billy-be-dug-gun ef I don't climb all up your back, my own self—so I will, now!"

The giant stockman seemed taken fairly aback by those different speeches, and as he hesitated, half-glancing toward the blazing building, Ten-strike Tom added swiftly:

"Out with it, sir! We're looking for Copeland and Whittaker; we are sure they came here, and now—where are they?"

"In yonder!" surlily growled the ranchman, flinging a hand out toward the burning building.

Even as he spoke another shot came from that quarter, and instantly divining the truth, the Man from Denver leaped to earth and ran toward the fire, shouting aloud as he did so:

"We're friends, Copeland—Whittaker! Come out! You're safe from injury, now, and—come out, I say!"

Another shot from the blazing mass rung forth above the roaring of the flames, and the bullet hummed viciously close to the right ear of the King-Pin Sport.

Still advancing, Gayworthy jerked forth a white-silk handkerchief, waving it above his head as he cried at the top of his voice:

"Come, friends! We've made it all right, and now—come, if only for the sake of Alda Copeland."

As though the mere sound of that name was sufficient to work a miracle, the blazing door was suddenly flung wide, and out through those dancing, lancing, licking, flame-tongues two men dashed, one dropping to earth the limp body of a third!

A yell of exultation burst from both Ten-strike Tom and Go-easy Dan at this sight, but then changed to startled cries as the two living men staggered away, shooting wildly as they went!

"It's them, boss!" cried out one of the cowboys, lifting his Winchester as he added: "Shell I plug 'em, boss?"

"I'll plug you!" sternly shouted the King-Pin Sport, as he leaped forward, shooting forth a hard-clinched fist as he came. "Lie down, you fool!"

The cowboy dropped as though smitten by a lightning-bolt; and then, whirling to face the force of the C. Bar Ranch, Ten-strike Tom drew forth revolvers, sternly crying as they came to a level:

"Call off your hounds, McCoy, or let 'em tackle me!"

"An' me, too!" fairly squealed Go-easy Dan Flick, as he sprang to the side of the Man from Denver, leveling his rusty old rifle squarely at the giant stockman himself. "Call 'em off, or over goes your apple-cart, Big Art!"

All this took place with marvelous rapidity, and only now had the master of the C. Bar Ranch a fair opportunity to make himself heard.

Knowing old Dan Flick as well as he did, he could hardly fancy him standing up so boldly in defense of dubious parties, and so he shouted:

"Let 'em go, lads! We can get 'em if we need, and now—that powder! If it explodes! Good-by, all! I'm going in after a load, and all who have nerve enough—follow your leader!"

The last words came from his lips as he bowed head and plunged direct into the heart of that mass of fire!

An instant later he reappeared, a couple of powder-kegs in his arms, and throwing them far away from the burning building, he turned to repeat the feat.

"Look to the lads, Dan!" cried Ten-strike Tom, dropping off his belt of arms and springing forward. "I'm going to follow suit, just for luck!"

That was example enough, and with wild yells and enthusiastic cries the cowboys dropped their weapons and rushed toward that flame-wreathed opening, just as Big Art McCoy appeared for the second time.

And thus, in less than two brief minutes an awful peril was averted, for the last keg of powder was safely carried out; and though the store-house with its vast amount of valuable goods was plainly doomed to utter destruction, the rest of the buildings were comparatively safe.

"You're white—clean white, stranger!" cried McCoy as he gripped the hand of the Man from Denver, a few seconds later. "And if you go bail for those young fellows—"

"I'll answer for them with my very life, sir!" quickly answered Ten-strike Tom, then breaking away from that hearty grip as he caught sight of Go-easy Dan hurrying toward them. "Well, Flick?"

"They're safe, boss, but—hellow thar!"

For yonder came riding at full speed a man and a woman, the latter reaching forth her arms and crying aloud:

"Brother—Jay—thank heaven! I am here, and you—oh, thank kind heaven you are safe!"

And, with glad cries the trio were joined into one!

CHAPTER XXXI.

VIRTUE AND VICE REWARDED.

THROUGH all this stirring scene Cephas Copeland had remained but a half-dazed spectator, forgotten alike by those who had brought him to the C. Bar Ranch, and those among whom he had been so impetuously hurried.

If he saw those smoke-blackened figures burst forth from the blazing store-house, he did not recognize either, but when, a little later, two horses came dashing upon the scene, the leading rider reaching forth arms as that appeal crossed lips, the old man gave a choking cry, and fairly fell off the black stallion.

He recognized the niece whom he had domineered over so many years, and whose true value he had just begun to realize.

Philo Copeland and Jay Whittaker had turned to bay when at a safe distance from the fire, not yet realizing how far matters had changed for the better, but with backs protected by that tall, tight board fence they

gripped their weapons and prepared to sell their lives as dearly as might be, preferring to die fighting than to yield for the shameful noose.

And it was not until Alda rode up and sprung from her mount, that the young men recognized a friend; then, tight clasped in each other's arms they forgot fighting and death for the time being.

Ten-strike Tom and Go-easy Dan were not the least surprised of all present, but they saw that the maiden had been accompanied by a comely-looking fellow in cowboy garb, who was now slouching sidewise in his saddle while grinning benevolently at that joyous reunion.

In another minute both men were at his side, eagerly questioning him as to how and where the young lady had been rescued.

"We jest happened to run acrost 'em, ye see," willingly came the explanation. "We was on our way to the C. Bar, an' when we ketched the sound of hosses—waal, we lay low long 'nough fer to make out the two p'izen critters hed a leddy in tha'r grips, an' so—we jest tuck 'em all in!"

"Alive?" sharply asked the Man from Denver.

"Waal, one o' the critters showed up balky, an' we sort o' creased him, ye know," with a broadening grin. "None to hurt so mighty bad, but plenty 'nough fer to make him docile while the hobbles was bein' putt on. An' then—waal, when we got to talkin' it all over, an' the young ma'am found we was boun' fer the C. Bar, that 'peared to strike her right whar she lived! An' so, when we glimpsed the fire, thar, she would put on mo' steam, an' I come 'long fer to keep her right side up 'ith keer!"

While this explanation was taking place, Cephas Copeland rallied from the glad shock which had caused his fall, and creeping nearer the overjoyed trio, he stood like one in fear and trembling, waiting for—what?

Presently Alda flashed a glance around, and as she saw her uncle by the red glow of the blazing building, she gave both start and cry, for the moment shrinking away with paling face.

Cephas waited for no more, although Jay Whittaker drew the maiden back with close-clasping arms, scowling blackly at the intruder the while.

Pausing when almost within arm's-length of his relatives, the old man spoke in far from steady tones:

"Don't hate me too bitterly, Alda! I've been blind—miserably blind to truth and justice! But now—the diamonds were all yours, Alda, and Philo, I never meant—I thought it would kill me to give them up; but now, I'll make full amends, children, if you'll only love—if you'll only forgive and say you do not utterly despise me!"

It may have been weakness, brought on by all he had undergone of late, or possibly it was through his realizing sense of wrongdoing, but old Copeland fell upon his knees there at the foot of his dead brother's children, and before the eyes of them all bowed his gray head in the dust.

One moment thus; then Alda broke away from the arms of her lover, and kneeling by the repentant sinner, drew his trembling head to her bosom after dropping a warm kiss of reconciliation upon his brow.

Then, after a brief silence, the maiden likewise made confession; nor did she feel that the presence of so many strangers absolved her from the full performance of that duty.

"All the wrong-doing was not on your side, Uncle Cephas. I took the diamonds from you; then I lost them! If you can forgive and forget, surely we ought to try for the same; so—brother!"

She rose to her feet as the young man slowly moved that way, his blackened face certainly betraying more doubt and reluctance than hearty good will.

Paying no attention to that, if indeed she noticed it in her powerful agitation, the girl joined their hands with her own, tried to speak, broke down, then turned, with a choking sob, to find herself close-clasped in the strong arms of her lover, Jay Whittaker.

Some portion of this was witnessed by Big Art McCoy and his cowboys, but not all. The fall of the store-house roof served to break that odd spell, and the giant ranch-

man ordered his men to guard the other buildings from the myriads of flying sparks.

Then, as the danger suddenly lessened, another alarm came, in the shape of clattering hoofs and a round half-score of armed men.

McCoy instantly recognizing them as being from the ranch where the buckskin horse had been stolen, and brutal murder committed at the same time, he sprung forward to more closely examine those bound and sulen prisoners.

One was Heber Kane, the other his angel-faced partner, Marsh Tyndall, who still looked wondrously beautiful in spite of the half-dry blood which marked his face, and despite the vicious snarl with which he showed his small, even rows of white teeth.

His right leg was shattered at the knee, and he must have been suffering frightful pain, yet he scoffed at the crowd as he was surrounded by the men from C. Bar Ranch.

Go-easy Dan made no bones about accusing Tyndall of murdering the two cowboys at his mountain home, and Kane, on being questioned, admitted as much.

Strange looks were interchanged by those stern-faced men; and as the dulled glow of that fire began to dim before the dawning day, a nearly general move was made away from that too-open spot.

With the two prisoners riding at the head of the procession, way was made for the nearest clump of timber, where a halt was called.

Go-easy Dan Flick was called upon to repeat his charges, which he did with more pleasure than reluctance, and after him came the Man from Denver.

Very few words spoke Thomas Gayworthy; but that evidence weighed even more heavily against the doomed wretches than aught the mountain vagabond had been able to say.

Having spoken, the Man from Denver moved away, never once looking back toward that rude tribunal.

Ten-strike Tom rejoined the little group gathered near the main building, and congratulated one and all upon the happy outcome of their trouble.

"There is only one thing lacking, and that is—excuse me!—that is a certain plug of black navy tobacco!"

"That blessed tobacco again!" cried Jay Whittaker, with a gesture of real or counterfeit impatience. "It all may sound mighty amusing to you, who are in the secret, but to me—"

With a half-shy glance around, blushing divinely, Alda took his arm, and drawing a little apart, proceeded to make full confession to her lover, at the same time making clear their reasons for keeping him so completely in the dark.

All that took time, as a matter of course, and the lovers were still talking apart from the rest when that little procession came back, only minus their two prisoners!

"They escaped!" briefly explained Big Art McCoy, then changed the subject by inviting the company in to break their fast.

CHAPTER XXXII.

GO-EASY DAN'S BENEDICTION.

THE question of horse-theft, so far as Whittaker and Copeland were concerned, was not brought up at all, although Big Art McCoy had made certain that neither young men had been concerned in that brutal outrage for which he had arrested them.

The party by whom Alda Copeland was rescued proved to be the witnesses sent for, and they failed to recognize their coveted game in either of the young men covertly pointed out for their careful inspection. Nor could they declare that Tyndall or Kane had been among the raiding squad of rustlers, despite the fact that the buckskin gelding was one of the animals stolen on, that particular occasion.

If the matter was not actually brought up publicly, then, it was indirectly noticed, for Arthur McCoy rose from the long table at which all were seated at a late breakfast, and with glass in hand, gravely proposed the health of Philo Copeland and Jay Whittaker!

"I know it's mighty small amends to make, but until the time rolls 'round when I can do better, I wish to say just this: I ask

the gentlemen to forgive me for my mistakes, and from this hour henceforward they have the freedom of the C. Bar Ranch! All they see is theirs, and they can't gratify me more than by taking their pick; live stock or dead, real estate or personal property; all is theirs for the simple wishing!"

The two young men thus spoken of, interchanged glances. Philo nodded to Jay, and Whittaker slowly rose in his place, speaking gravely:

"I am almost sorry that you brought this up so publicly, Mr. McCoy, but since you have, I'll say just this much:

"If you think you are still in our debt, pay it to the memory of poor Jack Hogan! Maybe he wasn't quite a saint, but he gave up his life while trying his level best to make amends for one of those mistakes, and so I repeat: pay the balance to him, and we'll rest content!"

"Those are my sentiments," declared Philo, rising to bow, hand over heart.

Although this was well-meant on the part of the giant ranch-owner, it cast a sense of constraint over all present, and the proposition made by Ten-strike Tom that they at once begin their return trip to the relay-station, was eagerly welcomed by the little company.

Quick to recognize the mistake he had made, Arthur McCoy gracefully accepted the situation without making a bad matter worse, as he might very easily have done by insisting on their remaining longer under his now friendly roof-tree.

Instead, he caused the pick of his riding-horses to be brought up, one of them equipped with a side-saddle which had belonged to his wife, before her death. And, without offering to force his company upon them further, he escorted them to the limits of the C. Bar Ranch.

Here their parting was cut short, and he of the C. Bar Ranch turned away for his homeward ride, certainly a wiser if not a sadder man, in some respects.

As for the others, Go-easy Dan at once assumed command, earnestly declaring that he'd never forgive the slight if the young lady refused to pay his mountain shack another brief visit, now that the ugly clouds were scattering and the sun of happiness was beginning to glow!

Philo Copeland could not suppress a laugh at that gorgeous figure of speech, but made amends by heartily seconding Go-easy Dan's proposition.

"I'm hungry as a cross-cut saw!" he declared, bluntly, shrugging his shapely shoulders as he cast a brief glance toward the C. Bar Ranch. "I couldn't begin to eat, back yonder! What I did manage to worry down fairly choked me, after—ugh!"

Alda glanced covertly at Uncle Cephas, who now showed the effects of his past excitement and mental strain. Then she gently accepted that offer, ostensibly on her own account, but really for the sake of her uncle.

When drawing nigh the mountain retreat, Whittaker and Ten-strike Tom pressed on in advance, and by the time the remainder of the party had come, all traces of that double assassination had been removed.

The bodies of the two cowboys were borne from cabin to a snug covert further up the hill, there to remain until decent burial could be given them.

Knowing what was being done, Go-easy Dan guided his company very leisurely, and the sun was far down toward the western hills when they reached that rude log cabin.

The Mountain Vagabond fell to work briskly about supper, and soon had a goodly store of appetizing viands in readiness, to which the company sat down with a far heartier goodwill than they had felt at the banquet spread for them by Big Art McCoy.

Now, as then, the master of the feast rose in his place, glass in one hand, its fellow thrust into his bosom in ludicrous imitation of the Giant Ranchman; now as then he began a speech which took an apologetic form before going very far.

Among other things, Go-easy Dan said:

"The plain facts o' the case is just like this, my good friends: I sot out with makin' a mistake o' jedgment, an' I've pretty nigh kep' it clean up from start to finish!

"Fer one thing, I tuck the pritty lady, hyar, fer a thief! To be shore I was a plum fool, but then—she jest es good es 'fessed up she hed done stole a plug o' black navy!"

"Then come the ole gent, an' he owned up to the same thing, on'y tellin' of it in dif'rent sort o' way. An' so—how was I to know which one really owned the terbacker?"

The Man from Denver gave a low cry, but Go-easy Dan motioned him to sit still, and quickly added:

"An' so, gittin' all muxed up that-a-way, folkses, I've come to the 'clution to do jest this: take a chaw with the ole man, an' call it even all 'round!"

With those words Go-easy hauled forth a plug of black navy tobacco, which had one corner bit off, grinning broadly as he held it forth, midway between uncle and niece.

"The diamonds!" gasped Cephas Copeland.

"Easy, go easy!" cried Flick, bursting into a hearty laugh, as he let the precious plug fall upon the table. "Thar she am, an' mighty dug-gun glad I be fer to git shet o' the blamed thing!"

"I found it the night I was comin' home, a'ter readin' the trail o' McCoy's Little-foot, but I never knowed what was wrong ontel—see!" as he opened his mouth and pointed to a broken tooth. "Fu'st chaw, I got that bu'sted tooth, an' hyar's what I done found in the chaw!"

He dropped a glittering, glowing diamond on the table beside the plug of tobacco, then added:

"Settle who's the owner atwixt ye, good people! And may the good Lord prosper ye from now on, jest es ye may deserve by yer merits!"

Thomas Gayworthy parted with the Copeland party at Deadwood, and after transacting the business which brought him there, hurried back to the city of Denver, where his beloved wife, once Fanny Barbour, was awaiting his arrival.

They were still on their pleasure trip when word came to them through the mail from Alda Copeland, the paper likewise bearing the signature of Jay Whittaker, to the effect that they surely must shorten their excursion, and hasten back toward the rising sun to assist in the transformation of maiden to wife, of Alda Copeland to Alda Whittaker!

"Uncle Cephas likewise begs for your coming. He feels that you and dear old Go-easy Dan (to whom a like invitation is on its way) played the most important part in converting him to manhood once more!"

"Well, dear?" softly asked Mrs. Fanny, with a sweet smile.

"I reckon we'll have to take the trip, little woman!" declared the "Man from Denver," closing the letter.

And so did Go-easy Dan!

THE END.

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